

The Impact of Structure in Asia - Pacific Region

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Received 14 August 2020; published 15 October 2020

Abstract: *Structure is one of the most pivotal exogenous factors affecting states and the relations between them. Located in the Asia Pacific region, Vietnam is also affected by the regional structure. The paper first explores some theoretical issues of structural impacts, based on which it then examines further such impacts in the Asia-Pacific region.*

Keywords: Structure, International Relations, Asia-Pacific

Introduction

Structures are historically shaped along with the development of international systems, proving their growing influences in modern times (see Hoang Khac Nam, 2020a: 3-15). The importance of structures to international relations has been widely discussed in literature (see Hoang Khac Nam, 2020b) and become the focus of some theories, such as neorealism and structuralism. It is hence necessary to examine impacts of the structures on a country and on cross-border relations for the purpose of policy making and development of appropriate response measures.

As an Asian-Pacific country, Vietnam is influenced significantly by the regional structures. Such impacts appear to be increasing with deeper integration and require to be studied properly. By looking also at the case of the Asia-Pacific region, the article aims to contribute to the debate two issues. Firstly, impacts of structures vary by theory, which are reflected through

diverse conceptions of their roles, directions, intensity, and levels of influence. Secondly, the literature on the topic in Vietnam has not distinguished the differences between impacts of structures and those caused by exogenous factors. Both of these issues inhibit the identification of the impacts themselves and of how they likely to happen and in what directions. Although the article has not yet provided conclusive answers for these questions, it not least plays a part in the interpretation of such impacts in the case of the Asia-Pacific region.

1. Theoretical foundation on impacts of structures

Impacts of structures are sometimes intangible and not easy to observe, particularly when determining their directions and influential magnitude and levels. Thus, the following accounts lay the ground for an assessment of impacts of structures in the Asia-Pacific region:

Firstly, impacts of structures seem more stable than other kinds of impacts because

their arrangements and major aspects change slowly. The distribution of power in an international structure is subject to the power relationships, of which changes would take time to occur. Similarly, common patterns of relationships and general laws, despite their existence in the system or the structure and the adjustments due to competition or by wishes, would not experience changes rapidly thanks to the support from great powers and many other countries.

Secondly, impacts of structure strong or weak depends considerably on the international system and levels of interaction between actors of international relationships. Usually, the impacts of structures would more likely affect such actors and their relationships if international systems are secure with strong interactions between actors. Conversely, those impacts might be weaker when the systems are lax and actors' interactions are shakier. The structures in the Asia-Pacific region also experience changes in all three areas (political-security, economic and non-material) and their impacts are strong enough because of the development of regional systems and high interdependence among the actors in the region. In practice, all countries in the region pursue regionalism and prioritize regional affairs among their foreign policies. Moreover, impacts of structures of different fields could have influences on each other due to the increasing interactions among these structures in international contexts. It is the resonance of impacts between structures.

Thirdly, structures of political-security and economic fields produce quite strong impacts because these are the two fundamental fields of national security and

development of the countries in the region. Other regions in the world also share this feature. Since security risks in the Asia-Pacific region have been recorded in history, member nations of the region pay particular attention to such issues, resulting in the growing impacts of the regional political-security structures. Similarly, the countries' commitment to economic development and the strong economic interdependence among them have led to strong impacts of regional economic structures. Whereas, the impacts of regional non-material structures seem weaker owing to little interests in this field and the unpopularity of such structures themselves. There remain differences and competition in the field, so the impacts of such structures are also limited. This feature distinguishes the Asia-Pacific region from the Europe where the influences of non-material structures are more significant.

Fourthly, impacts of regional structures on each nation differ despite their same sources and directions. It is due to the disparities of countries in terms of absorbability, tolerance, and response capability. Thus, some problem might have strong/positive impacts on one country but insignificant/negative for another. In addition, the impacts also depend on the perceptions of a country, particularly its leadership and elites. Some countries in the region might acknowledge the impacts, others might not; some might consider the impacts significant while others might see them negligible. The recognition of impacts therefore could only be informed through the behaviors and awareness of individual country/player. And though the general impacts might occur, the same impacts on member countries in the region could be hardly observed.

Fifthly, when examining the impacts of regional structures on a nation, it is necessary to consider the impact magnitude. The impacts could be sensed nationwide or locally, for the whole society or just one social class or part of the population. Some impacts could influence the political or economic system while some others could just cause a specific issue or affect some particular fields or industries/occupations. The larger the magnitude and the more critical the hit point, the greater the impacts. It is important to policy makers to pay attention to this feature in order to avoid excessiveness or inadequacy in policy responses.

Sixthly, international affairs and impacts of structures always bring about both opportunities and challenges, which need to be identified for better strategies of utilization. To a certain extent, opportunities often have relations with favorable impacts of structures while challenges seem to go with adverse impacts. Moreover, since opportunities are restricted in number, they would easily turn into challenges to a nation if not being utilized and then would be seized by another. This is an important note to inferior countries in order to avoid being lagged behind. Challenges, however, might result in opportunities also. Once a nation overcome their challenges, it is recognized by others and enjoy more opportunities thereby.

Seventhly, impacts of structures, though must be taken into account, are not always determining factors but just among exogenous factors. International affairs in general and countries' policy decisions and adoption of instruments in particular depend also on endogenous factors. Thus, impacts of structures should be counted as one

among important factors and international relations need to consider the structures themselves and other factors as well.

These seven points lay the ground for our examination of the impacts of structures in the Asia-Pacific region regarding their source, magnitude, and level. The classification of the impacts into favorable and adverse groups is mainly based on Vietnam's comparative perspective because the judgement of favorability or adversity depends also on the actor's resilience and response capabilities.

2. Impacts of structures in the Asia-Pacific region

2.1. Favorable impacts

- *Contributing to the regional stability.* The establishment of structures with prevalent models and conventional regulations is to serve the stabilization of international affairs. The more the structures develop, the more such relations are stabilized. Since the Cold War until present, international affairs in the Asia-Pacific region has been more stable than it was in previous periods thanks to the contribution of structures here.

Economic structures in the region have taken a strong foothold and tend to persist, contributing greatly to the stability of not only the region's economy but other domains as well. We argue that it is the region's economic structures as a key exogenous factor that helps stabilize the regional cross-border relations despite the uncertainties brought about by the US-China trade war. These structures had not experienced significant changes in all three aspects of their power distribution, prevalent models of relations, and conventional regulations during the escalation of the trade war. If China has to compromise eventually, these

structures could even become more fortified thanks to its intensification of normality and confidence in their regulations.

Meanwhile, the region's political-security structures incline towards stabilization in all four fundamental aspects of a structure¹. As for non-material structures, even a rivalry on perceptions and values between the US and China would not trouble much the regional stability because the impacts of these structures are not significant. Thus, the continuity of both sectorial and general structures in the Asia-Pacific region would contribute to the maintenance of the regional order and stability. Impacts of these structures accordingly would facilitate the initiatives or efforts for the regional stability while obstructing the policies or actions against the regional stability.

The more stable the regional political-security and economic structures are, the greater their impacts would be. They are even greater thanks to the compatibility of these regional structures with the tendencies of the world structures and systems as well as with the policies of the member countries for the region's political and security stability. Still there is possibility of actions harmful for this stability to occur, but more difficult for them to escalate and easier to control them under such strong impacts. We believe, either in the current or future context, these impacts are inducive enough for great powers because they also benefit from the regional stability. In order to gain the structural power through acquiring support from inferior countries, these major countries need to prove as well

their contribution to the regional stability in line with the region's targets. Even China as the source of many instabilities, it is likely to pay more attention to obtaining the advocacy and consensus from its inferior counterparts in the region rather than to pressuring them like recently.

- *Enhancing conflict management for regional stability.* One among the causes of this impact is the role of structures. The presence of structures or systems facilitates the transformation of regional conflicts and the expansion of regional cooperation. In consequence, conflicts are no longer a bilateral or local problem but an issue for the whole system/structure. Given the increasing interdependence in the Asia-Pacific region, regional conflicts are more likely to affect the entire system or structure, particularly ones that involves directly major countries. In the case, regional conflicts might have significant impacts in all three aspects of a structure, namely power distribution, prevalent patterns of relations, and common regulations. The occurrence of conflicts can completely change some aspects of a structure because they are not only originated from the relationships between relevant players but also associated with structural benefits of major countries, known also as the structural cause. The nuclear issue on the Korean peninsula, for example, cannot be considered just the problem between North-South Korea themselves.

Resolving regional conflicts accordingly has become increasingly dependent on regional structures and major powers outside the region. The structures with their prevalent patterns of relations and common regulations of structures allow better control of conflicts and push for the measures that

¹ Players, interactions, systems, and power distribution (see further Hoang Khac Nam, 2019: 400-411).

are compatible to the current structures/systems. This structural relevance not just occurs on the regional but global scale as well. Since the regional mechanisms are not enough to resolve the conflicts, internationalization of the conflicts and involvement of global structures would tend to increase. Taking the disputes in the East Sea (South China Sea) for an example where the intervention of the US and other major powers, like the UK and France, has been current and would possibly surge. This is a favorable impact towards restraining the escalation of the disputes.

From the perspective of major powers, their intervention in regional disputes is not just a competition for structural influence in order to maintain or modify the structures in favor of their interests, but a strategy to enhance their presence in regional power distribution, a fundamental aspect of structures. Thus, the solutions to the hotspots in the Asia-Pacific region (Korean peninsula, South China Sea, and Taiwan) would be more influenced by structures. Besides, the top priority of major powers, at present and in future, is to maintain regional stability and to restrain tension and promote peaceful settlement of disputes. Such impacts would benefit regional security in general and inferior countries in particular.

- *Promoting institutionalization in the region.* Structures as the order-organizer and -setter often have strong influence on the institutionalization towards ensuring regional stability. Institutionalization during the Cold War was weak because regional structures and systems were lax at the time and cross-border relations were featured by confrontation and polarization. The peaceful and cooperative

development of the Asia-Pacific region and institutionalization only began after the Cold War with massive establishments of organizations and mechanisms under the impacts of structure/system. As the regional structure tends to be more multi-polarized, thanks to the requirement of cooperation and force gathering together with the rise of China, institutionalization continued to develop but were influenced by various traction forces, leading to the overlap between regional institutions.

Although there has not yet been the presence of a security or economic institution for the Asia-Pacific region, the regional institutionalization in future tends to develop towards this paradigm through the promotion of highly-bond relation patterns and general rules. Greater cooperation and consultation on regional security remains as the prevailing relation pattern in the regional political-security structures. Regional institutions, therefore, would need to adjust to avoid overlaps and to cooperate more effectively. As for general rules, regional institutions would be more affected by and dependent on other general laws in the world.

Three significant arguments could be drawn from the impacts of structures during the process of institutionalization in the region. *First*, the establishment of an institution for major countries seems yet possible. It is because among major countries in the region still exists a strong competition. Low mutual trust between them pushes for their quests for support of inferior countries, which would take time and not so easy to achieve in the coming years. *Second*, the distribution of power among regional institutions has not been well-defined. Since major powers in the region

are still looking for support, they have not really imposed the rule between the strong and the weak. In addition, the variety and overlap of existing regional institutions leaves the formation of a new institution in difficulties and doubts. It would be more beneficial to make use of the ASEAN-led institutions to gather forces. *Third*, the regional institutions as such still do good for inferior countries in the Asia-Pacific region. They would continue to rely on the institutions founded by themselves in order to stay away from the enticement of superior countries and to enhance their positions in the regional structures through their collective voice/strength.

Besides, the non-material structures also contribute to the regional institutionalization. They are experiencing competition and overlaps in concepts, values, identities and norms though they have not been present in diversity yet. Their impacts, however, are not as strong as those of political-security and economic structures and mostly beneficial to inferior countries in institutionalization and position enhancement. In their absence of political-security and economic power, inferior countries like ASEAN member nations would continue bringing out their values and standards of international affairs through institutionalization. ASEAN countries would use more institutions led by themselves to disseminate the values which advance their benefits.

- *Sustaining popular relation patterns for cooperation in the region.* Cooperation has become a major trend and a fundamental relation pattern for political-security structures in the Asia-Pacific region. This trend has been maintained since the end of the Cold War despite fluctuations in

power rankings and the race for influence among major countries. The impact of this pattern is determined by the region's cooperation momentum and by recognized benefits shared among stakeholders under the influence of the global tendency of cooperation and integration.

Cooperation for development would sustain as a critical relation pattern in the Asia-Pacific region in the coming time even in the case that regional competition and disputes should escalate. The cooperation tendency, however, would occur mainly in economic structures rather than in political-security ones because regional economic cooperation would take place more comprehensively and widespread. The regionalization process and regionalism will be featured more in the economic field than other sectors. Strong flows of trade and investment would continue in the region. Furthermore, the economic interdependence present in regional structures/systems would help restrain political conflicts and avoid interruption of cooperation tendency. The cooperation pattern exists in political-security and non-material structures as countries in the region try to fend off disputes and conflicts, particularly in politics and security. Countries would hardly deliver their statements of values and opinions directly and openly in order to stay out of conflicts and economic and political troubles.

Non-material structures also contribute to the cooperation relation pattern in the Asia-Pacific region. Although their impacts are not considered as strong as of other structures in the region, all member countries show a common agreement on cooperation and benefits have been actually recognized. Moreover, the increase in

regional cooperation in both bottom-up and top-down directions of institutionalization has considerably pushed for regional cooperation. At the same time, the competition among major countries would likely remain soft and informal to avoid direct confrontation and fragmentation as in the Cold War. Regional cooperation therefore would not be put in danger.

- *Continuing the region's relative peace.* All of the aforementioned impacts of structures in the Asia-Pacific region contribute to maintaining the regional peace: Stability to reduce possibility of wars; conflict management to avoid wars; institutionalization to better conflict management and conflict resolution; cooperation to curtail conflicts and create an enabling environment for conflict resolution.

The developments of structure also indicate low possibilities of wars. Despite changes in the distribution of power, they are not significant enough to result in changes in the regional order of power. Given the increase in China's synergy, its gap to the US remains considerable, not to mention the fact that the US has its strong allies in the region while China does not. Moreover, cooperation and integration are still the fundamental and major pattern of relations. Existing regional institutions promote preventive diplomacy, though not yet of high extent, for conflict management. Major conflicts in the region so far have shown little likelihood of fierce confrontation in the next few years, even in the case of escalation in conflict and competition, because the general laws and values in the region do not advocate war and hostility. The impacts of global structures are also in favor of world peace and development

of international laws and mechanisms for peacekeeping.

Similar from the countries' perspective, they want peace for development. Wars, in general terms, mean disasters, particularly when modern weapons are highly destructive. Thus, the advocacy for world peace will remain in future, an opportunity for the regional peace and stability that benefits all countries in the region despite disputes and power competition or arms race. The impact of structures for maintaining regional peace is strong enough for us to believe in short- and even medium-term of regional peace.

2.2. Adverse impacts

- *US-China power rivalry*, particularly for structural power to become the greatest power in the region, is influenced by the impacts of current structures. This competition is inevitable, according to the neorealism, as the gap between the most powerful country and a country with emerging power is not too large. This is a long-run competition which will last in many years to come and affect the entire region.

Both the US and China continue to enhance their synergies and regional influence to gain better structural power. Due to the fact that the distribution of regional power cannot be changed quickly, both countries step up the competition by medium-term means, such as restricting opportunities of each other, obtaining regional influence, drawing support from the member countries, seeking control of geostrategic and geo-economic locations in the region, disseminating and enhancing their own perceptions, values, and laws, and so forth. They even attempt to involve other major powers to increase their influence in the region, like China's

moves towards Russia or the US' and Japan's actions towards India and Australia and possibly UK and France in near future. Two results would follow: more complexity of the region's international affairs and stronger attachment of regional structures to global structures. The US-China power competition therefore is influenced by both regional and global structures.

Such competition for structural power could lead to a polarized situation of the region's power distribution. In this bipolar structure of power, the US and its allies still have the upper hand while China intimidates inferior countries with its mystical power to prevent them from turning to the US and continues to increase its influence with its economic and geographic advantages within the region. The US-China competition would create a state of flux for regional structures that would affect the whole system and generate tensions and distrust in regional affairs. Accordingly, it would be more difficult to shape general laws under such pressures. Regional institutions would face risks of conflicts and become less effective due to the oppression of the competing powers in all three structures - political, economic, and non-material. This would be the biggest challenges to the entire region.

The structures/systems in the Asia-Pacific region are highly open with various connections to the global structures/systems. Moreover, the competition for power is not just regional but global because the US is holding the greatest power and China has made no secret of its ambition to gain similar supremacy. The race for power therefore affects the global structures as well.

- *Threats to regional stability and security and inferior countries.* Structure is an exogenous factor that contributes to the maintenance of order between the superior and inferior countries. The US-China's competition for structural power will increase pressure on other countries and entice their support for these two countries to gather their regional forces. Inferior countries under such pressures would likely be manipulated and become more dependent, which would challenge their comprehensive security. The current and future structures still allow superior countries to do so. However, the level of intervention and manipulation might be less intrusive and blatant than before thanks to the existing pro-cooperation relation patterns and general laws set by regional and global structures. Besides military and political manipulation, economic and diplomatic interventions would also increase. The pressure and manipulation are maintained by both hard and soft power. Whoever adopts more gentle approaches might gain advantages because such methods appear to fit the current international structures/systems.

Regional affairs would be more complex and unpredictable if the aforementioned pressures and enticements persist. The comprehensive security of the countries in the region would be at risk due to the constant threats from the competition for structural power and the manipulation of major countries. Countries having disputes with these major powers would face more difficulties and be easily used as the battle for the 'power game', which had happened in the Cold War. In the case, inferior countries might adopt non-committal preventive policies, leading to a decrease

in regional integration and more unstable regional affairs. Armed conflicts between superior and inferior countries might occur, particularly when the superiors would want to take advantage of strategic locations or so forth. Such occurrences, however, would be likely at a small scale and low intensity thanks to the favorable impacts of regional structures as mentioned above.

- *Hierarchy of regional affairs*. Disparities, in terms of national synergy, military and economic power, and science and technology capabilities, between countries in the region remain quite large and cannot not be narrowed anytime soon. The hierarchy in political-security, economic and non-material structures therefore is obvious and, to some extent, contributes to the stability of regional affairs and the organization of regional structures/systems. Nevertheless, conflicts exist between and within levels of the hierarchy and in all three types of structures, making the relations between countries in the region intricate. The structures thus play as an important cause to the movements of international affairs within and between countries in these modern days.

Impacts from the hierarchy of political-security structures are the greatest among three types of structures as they are the two fundamental fields of international affairs. Movements at the upper and middle levels of the hierarchy produce the strongest impacts. The US-China conflict represents the battle for structural power at the upper level that influences most the structures and generates regional impacts. Meanwhile, the conflicts at the lower level also exist but are controllable and not too significant to influence regional affairs. That means apart from considering the conflicts at the lower

level, inferior countries should contain conflicts at the upper level in order to avoid being used by the superiors.

As for the conflicts between levels, this hierarchy creates an unequal political-security relationship and disproportionate economic dependence between superior and inferior countries. This so-called "order of relations" is determined by structures and bring disadvantages to inferior countries. In political-security structures, such hierarchy of relations limit the roles and voices of inferior countries and their institutions, like ASEAN, leading to higher possibility of external interventions in their internal affairs. Furthermore, the hierarchy also has strong effects on internal policies and economic structures of inferior/developing countries. These countries accordingly have to accept general rules set by the superiors for regional integration and participate in low-margin segments for economic development, resulting in a wider rich-poor gap and a heavy dependence on rich countries. The situation has been discussed by neo-Marxism scholars decades ago (see also Hoang Khac Nam, 2017).

The North-South gap therefore is created in structures with a growing gap between the rich and the poor, the developed and developing countries. The hierarchy, which would last for long, brings about also challenges in comprehensive development and security for inferior countries. Regional structures are shaped on the distribution of power, resulting in the decreasing influence of ASEAN-led institutions. The role of major countries would likely to increase even in such institutions and might overwhelm the role of ASEAN countries themselves.

3. Conclusion

In brief, the impacts of structures in the Asia-Pacific region are classified occur in two different directions. The favorable impacts contribute to regional stability, conflict control, and regional cooperation, reflecting the organization of structures. Meanwhile, adverse impacts stem from the race for structural power among major countries and the structural inequality, causing the competition and complexity of regional affairs.

Impacts of structures are real, as proven through the case of the Asia-Pacific region, and countries need to take them into account, particularly in these modern times. The magnitude of such impacts depends on the context and responses or choices of the influenced countries. It is necessary for Vietnam as a country in the region to also consider the impacts of structures as one

among exogenous factors that is inevitable and significant □

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