

The United States' Multilateral Security Cooperation in Southeast Asia in the First Two Decades of the Twenty-First Century and the Impacts on Vietnam

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Abstract The purpose of this article is to clarify the issue of the US multilateral security cooperation in Southeast Asia during the first two decades of the twenty-first century and its impact on Vietnam. This study focuses on analyzing two fundamental issues: the crucial drivers to promote the US multilateral security cooperation with Southeast Asian countries; the main multilateral security cooperation activities that the US conducted in Southeast Asia from 2001 to 2020 and their impacts on Vietnam. To carry out this research, in addition to the historical research method, the author focuses on using analytical - synthesis method academic documents, diplomatic papers to deeply understand the research object, combining systematize method author's research data to make relevant assessments. From the research results, the article shows that: 1. Multilateral security cooperation is an effective way for the US to minimize the disadvantages of its geopolitical position in Southeast Asia; 2. The content of multilateral mechanisms proposed or joined by the US in Southeast Asia is aimed at comprehensive security but tends to focus on the military-security; 3. The "US" multilateral security cooperation activities in Southeast Asia have had profound and vital impacts on Vietnam, especially since the establishment of the Comprehensive Partnership (July 2013) in the context of Vietnam is facing security challenges in its sovereignty dispute in the East Sea.

Keywords: Multilateral security cooperation, the US, Southeast Asia, impact, Vietnam.

Introduction

There have been many studies on the security situation and security architecture in Asia-Pacific, including studies on the situation of multilateral security cooperation in

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Southeast Asia. The typical studies can be mentioned as” “Cooperative Security in the Asia - Pacific: the ASEAN Regional Forum” (Hürgen, & Noel, 2010), “The Architecture of Security in the Asia-Pacific” (Ron, 2011), “Bilateralism, Multilateralism and Asia-Pacific Security: Contending Cooperation” (William & Brendan, 2013), “Southeast Asian Security in the New Millenium” (Richard & Sheldon, 1996). These studies all confirm the complexity of Asia-Pacific security in general, including Southeast Asia’ security, from the beginning of the twenty-first century to the present and recognize the role and dominance of the ’US’s bilateral security alliances in this region. Typically as the evaluation of Ralf Emmers: security cooperation in Asia-Pacific continues to be dominated by bilateral alliances between the US and regional partners. These links are keys to regional stability (See & Amitav, 2004: 3-18).

Meanwhile, several other scholars have studied the US national security strategy for Southeast Asia in the post-Cold War period (Fraser Cameron, 2005), (Nguyen Hoang Giap, Nguyen Thi Que & Nguyen Thi Le, 2007), (Pham Cao Cuong, 2019) and debated the multilateralism in the foreign policy of this great power (Stewart Patrick, Shepard Forman (Ed.), (2002). However, these studies focus on analyzing the content of each security strategy (Nguyen Hoang Giap, Nguyen Thi Que & Nguyen Thi Le, 2007) or presenting the views of the US government on multilateralism in foreign policy. Therefore, the ’US’ multilateral security cooperation aspect is also mentioned but is generalized because of the “se studies’ access vast space. They access the Asia-Pacific region instead of just in Southeast Asia. As a result, there is a lack of a separate study on the US multilateral security cooperation in Southeast Asia.

In Vietnam, there are two main approaches related to the topic of multilateral security cooperation in Southeast Asia. These are:

- Research on strategic competition among great powers (especially between the US and China) in Southeast Asia (Nguyen Thai Yen Huong Ed., 2011), (Nguyen Hoang Giap Ed., 2013), (Tran, Khanh Ed., 2014);
- Introduce multilateral security cooperation mechanisms and analyze their role in the general security architecture of East Asia (Hoang Minh Hang 2014), (Phan Thi Thu Dung 2018).

Both these approaches refer to the presence of the US but are not intended to systematically analyze multilateral security cooperation issues of this great power in Southeast Asia. The studies mentioned above have suggested ideas and provided valuable data for us to carry out this research.

1. The Driving Forces Promote the US Multilateral Security Cooperation in Southeast Asia in the First Two Decades of the Twenty-first Century

1.1 The Objective Factors

The key reason driving the US to promote security cooperation in Southeast Asia at the beginning of the twenty-first century was the transformation of the security

environment in this region, with growing complex and vital security issues that have profound effects on strategic interests and position of the US. In addition to the historical and traditional internal security issues¹, there are also challenges of non-traditional, multi-faceted and multi-border security in Southeast Asia from the early-first century up to now. Among them, the most serious challenges are the rise of international terrorism, the development of radical nationalism, territorial disputes, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, pandemics, environmental degradation, out of resources. All of these security challenges require a multitude of countries to work together. According to Thayer Carlyle A. (2010), at least eight major trends driving strategy changed the strategy of Southeast Asian countries strategy, which led to many difficulties for their foreign partners like the US. However, despite this security status, Southeast Asia's role - through the ASEAN organization and individual Southeast Asian countries - has grown with the advancement of the geostrategic values of this region. In addition to the dynamic, fairly sustainable economic development and the thriving regionalism consciousness of Southeast Asian countries, 'China's expansion of influence in the region serves as a "catalyst" powerful in upgrading the geopolitical position of Southeast Asia. China has been quietly, quickly filling the "power vacuum" created by the US and Russia in Southeast Asia after the Cold War ended in the mid-1990s and has stepped up to do so with a "Charm offensives" from the early twenty-first century. Accordingly, along with the sudden and continuous increase in economic and military strength, China drastically has implemented neighboring diplomacy, focused on multilateral cooperation modalities, and gained many achievements in all aspects², especially economy and military. Not only cooperating

¹ The Southeast Asean countries have to resolve the historical existence of bilateral and multilateral between them. Southeast Asia is the regional capital of the native security elements complex, is influenced strongly, deeply from the Cold War security situation becomes more and more complex. In particular, territorial disputes, territorial Asean's potential risks, the biggest threat to stability within Asean. That was the cases of territorial dispute between the Philippines and Malaysia in Sabah; between Malaysia and Singapore in Pedra Branca island; between Malaysia and Indonesia in two islands of Sipadan and Ligitan; between Malaysia and Thailand on the border of the two countries; between Thailand and Cambodia over ownership of the temple Preah Vihear; territorial sovereignty dispute over the East Sea ... These problems were resolved through different degrees and ways, but there is no end. In addition, differences in political institutions and national interests lead to differences in some cognitive issues and security concepts. In addition, the recent security developments showed, the Southeast Asian countries not only face the non-traditional security problems but also the emerging traditional security problems, especially disputes territorial sovereignty, the rise of extreme nationalism ... (Bui Thi Thao 2014: 549).

² Since the Asian financial crisis in 1997, China has promoted to build a legal basis to move towards establishing multilateral cooperation mechanisms in many fields with Southeast Asian countries through ASEAN's role. Most notably: the issuance of the ASEAN-China Joint Declaration (December 16, 1997), signing the ASEAN-China Free Trade Area Framework Decree (2002), signing the "Joint Declaration on

with individual countries, but China also promotes multilateral cooperation with Southeast Asian countries through the role of ASEAN. The noteworthy aspect here is that China is increasingly acting assertively in international relations besides “financial diplomacy,” “cultural and carrot diplomacy.” China’s worrisome acts have a profound impact on the security environment and the security structure of the area; it threatens the interests and position of the US and prompts the US to implement a corresponding multilateral security strategy.

As for Southeast Asian countries, besides interests, Southeast Asian countries also recognize economic dependence, political and diplomatic pressure, and the increasing risk of insecurity from over-dependence on China, especially when its ambitions are increasingly evident through its ambition to monopolize the East Sea and the “China’s Dream” grand strategy. These threats from China are the basis for Southeast Asian countries to implement the policy of balancing the big powers, promoting the need for security cooperation with the US (and other powers) as a balancing factor in relations with China. These are also favorable objective conditions for the US to promote security cooperation in Southeast Asia in the first two decades of the twenty-first century.

It could be said that, from the beginning of the twenty-first century until now, Southeast Asia’s role in the US has been emphasized more and more than ever by the integrated impact of many major security issues and related to the rise of China - a global strategic rival of the US. In particular, security of the East Sea, the Chineseization trend, and the substantial, fundamental role of ASEAN in the security architecture of Southeast Asia are the security aspects that urge the US to prioritize multilateral cooperation than focus on traditional bilateral security alliances as before. However, the U.S’ skepticism of multilateralism stemmed from past failures to build broad-based institutions (Jürgen Haacke and Noel M. Morada 2010: 37).

1.2 Internal Dynamics

Minimizing the disadvantage of geopolitical position in strategic competition with other regional powers in Southeast Asia is one of the motivations for the US to orient itself towards multilateral security cooperation in Southeast Asia from the beginning of the twenty-first century. The US’s geopolitical weakness in East Asia in general and Southeast Asia makes it difficult for the US to defend its multi-faceted interests,

the Conduct of Parties in the East Sea (DOC) and “Joint Declaration on Cooperation in Non-Traditional Security” (2002), expanding “Strategic Partnership” (2004) relationship with ASEAN in all fields ... According to China’s data, from the first half of 2020, China’s bilateral trade with neighboring Asia reached 632.1 billion USD, accounting for 31% of China’s total foreign trade turnover. In particular, China’s trade turnover with ASEAN increased by 5.6% over the same period in 2019. Accordingly, Southeast Asian countries have become China’s largest economic and trade partners. About 76% of China’s non-monetary direct investment capital into countries along the “Belt and Road” goes to Southeast Asia (La Chieu Huy 2021).

universalizing American values, and affirm its leading position in this area. Indeed, while China and other regional powers such as Japan and India have apparent geographical proximity advantage and relations in Eastern culture mutual exchanges, the US is recognized as a “Western” power with many spatial, cultural, and historical differences... The disadvantage of geopolitical position created a great barrier for the US to “come back” Southeast Asia after the Cold War. The US had “a lack of understanding” about Southeast Asia and neglected the region until the late 1990s. The United States had engrossed in the punitive war in the Middle East, deeply involved in Europe, North Africa, underestimated the role of ASEAN, and neglected Southeast Asian countries in the 1997 financial and monetary crisis. As mentioned above, actions stemming from the distraction caused the US role in Southeast Asia to be overshadowed and compromised its position. On the contrary, that created a great opportunity for China to promote geopolitical dominance through “neighboring diplomacy”, step by step building up favorable foundation conditions for promoting of their enormous initiatives and strategies such as “Community of Common Destiny” for mankind (2012), “Belt Road Initiative” (BRI - 2013) to realize and universalize “China plan” by economic, military, cultural ..., affirms regional leadership, realizing the “Chinese Dream”. The above contradictory results reflect the strategic mistakes of the US and clearly reveals the geopolitical disadvantage of this power in East Asia and Southeast Asia.

Therefore, the US must adjust the strategy to overpower this adverse status and curb China’s influence rapidly. Accordingly, favorable access enhances the frequency, scale, and level of presence to show strength; expanding space and content cooperation requires the United States to develop security links and promote multilateral cooperation. In implementing this cooperation method in Southeast Asia, the September 11, 2001 event makes sense as a push. It marked the return of the United States and opened a new period in the US Security Policy for Southeast Asia. After establishing a Department of Homeland Security (DHS) in 2002, the United States quickly built a global multilateral alliance against terrorism, in which Southeast Asia was identified as “The Second Front.” The US’ new positioning of Southeast Asia in the global alliance against terrorism is a convenient opportunity for the US to adjust its security cooperation strategy to multilateral trends. However, to overcome a limited geostrategic position in competing with China, the US needs more than a terrorist alliance. So, the contents security cooperation of the US in Southeast Asia in the first two decades of the 21st century and the future are multilateral and multi-field, towards comprehensive security goals. This goal reflects the cooperation needs of the United States with Southeast Asian countries and in the opposite direction.

The second essential driving force is that the US must overcome the mismatch between the security strategy for East Asia, which is increasingly spatially expanded, growing in size by the United States with the other side the actual limited presence of security links (resources) to deploy them. In Southeast Asia, this has been observed

through the US” delay in diversifying their security partners network. By the end of 2000, key US military links remained bilateral alliances with Thailand and the Philippines. The first bricks for the US to expand security links in Southeast Asia are the commitment to strengthening defense cooperation with the traditional partner (Singapore) and the “new partner” (Vietnam) after their coalition against terrorism was established in 2001. This was not enough, significantly when terrorism in Southeast Asia grew relatively “benign” and quickly gave way to a more significant threat from China’s wields decisive, systematic, and comprehensive influence expansion through their series of multilateral commitments, enormous initiatives, and actions.

In fact, the US had adjusted their East Asia security strategy towards a broader and more inclusive direction, while they were approaching Southeast Asia increasingly directly since G.W. Bush (2001 - 2008) and more substantially from the B. Obama period (2009 - 2016) to D. Trump (2017 - 2020) through the “Pivot to Asia strategy” and the “Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy.” However, the tendency to “selectively deploy” security issues and focus on bilateral security alliances that have been maintained for a long time has created security linkage blanks, preventing the US from having enough resources to implement these great new security strategies. Therefore, expansion of the partnership network, spatial development, scale, and content of cooperation are the driving forces for the US to promote multilateral security cooperation in Southeast Asia and maintain and consolidate bilateral security alliances.

The tradition of security cooperation between the US and Southeast Asian countries is favorable for the US to deploy this dynamic. Security cooperation in Southeast Asia can be viewed as an advantage for the US. The reason for this strength is the presence of the US’s five bilateral military alliances with some 100,000 troops in East Asia (Jürgen Haacke and Noel M. Morada 2010: 36). These security alliances allow the United States to maintain a relatively regular military influence and presence in Asia. As a result, the US is almost entirely proactive in its decision to return to Southeast Asia. The inherent security ties are an advantage even though it gives the US a subjective mentality (as it seems that all of the security concerns have been resolved by the bilateral alliances). However, the traditions of security cooperation and these bilateral alliances are key links for the US to expand security cooperation in a multilateral way.

In addition, the achievement of an essential forward step in relations with ASEAN is also a favorable condition for the United States to implement the multilateral security cooperation process in Southeast Asia. Since the second term of President G.W. Bush (2004 - 2008), the US and ASEAN have reached many cooperation agreements in essential areas: Joint Vision Statement on the ASEAN - US Enhanced Partnership (November 17, 2005); Trade and Investment Framework Agreement between the US and ASEAN (TIFA - August 25, 2006). In 2007, the US Senate also passed a resolution upholding 30 years of US-ASEAN relations (June 2007), appointed an ambassador to ASEAN (2007). The United States became ASEAN’s first dialogue partner to appoint

an ambassador, opening a phase to promote US-ASEAN relations. This is a foundation for accelerating the US' multilateral strategy implementation in Southeast Asia, first of all in the security and defense field.

In short, from the beginning of the 21st century, in addition to objective factors (in which China's impact plays a key role), the US multilateral security cooperation process is also driven by internal dynamics. All of these factors show that the US promotes multilateral security cooperation in Southeast Asia is inevitable.

2. The US Multilateral Security Cooperation Activities in Southeast Asia in the First Two Decades of the Twenty-first Century and Their Impacts on Vietnam

2.1 Actively Participating in Multilateral Security Cooperation Mechanisms Led by ASEAN

The participation in ASEAN-led security cooperation mechanisms was promoted by the United States after more than two decades (1977-2000) underestimated ASEAN's role as a significant regional organization. By the beginning of the twenty-first century, after President G.W.Bush started the war on terror (2001) and signed with Southeast Asian countries the Joint Declaration on Cooperation against Terrorism (August 2002), the US promoted multilateral security cooperation in this region. By 2020, the US has joined the four most important multilateral security cooperation mechanisms led by ASEAN. In which, except ARF, which the US has joined as a founding member since 1994, the remaining three mechanisms (includes Shangri - La Dialogue (SLD), East Asia Summit (EAS), ADMM +) all are new mechanisms that were established in the early twenty-first century³. ARF concentrates on political and security issues, while SLD and ADMM + favor security-military issues, and the EAS focuses more on non-traditional security issues. The US has gradually joined these mechanisms and deployed strategic security objectives in Southeast Asia as a focal point in its comprehensive strategic competition with China in Asia.

The US joined SLD as a founding member in 2002. Although Southeast Asian countries host SLD, it is an open, intergovernmental security forum in the Asia-Pacific region. Therefore, participation in SLD helps the US to share, express their views and attitudes about urgent common security concerns in the region. Through this forum, the US affirms its status as a Pacific nation, increasing its presence and sharing of security concerns, seeking opportunities for cooperating and promoting security solutions for

³ SLD is an intergovernmental security forum for Asia-Pacific countries, chaired by Southeast Asian countries through Singapore's leading role, established in 2002; East Asia Summit (EAS) was established in 2005 by 10 ASEAN countries and 6 East Asian countries (China, Japan, Korea, India, Australia and New Zealand) on the ASEAN +3 platform; ADMM + was established in 2010 on the basis of ADMM, which is ASEAN's highest private defense-security mechanism with key partners outside the region. In addition to the US, ADMM + 's main partners include China, Korea, Japan, India, Australia, New Zealand and Russia.

urgent security issues in the region, especially solving the East Sea issue by two main channels: political-diplomatic route; deploys military moves in the East Sea. At the 14th SLD (May 2015), with China rushing to build artificial islands and build illegal military facilities on 7 rocks in Spratlys, the US began the Maritime Security Initiative (MSI) for a military exercise with Southeast Asian countries only. Through his speech at the forum, the US Secretary of Defense - Ash Carter - publicly expressed the US government's views on the East Sea issue and objected to China's behaviors in this sea (Prashanth Parameswaran 2015). At this forum, the US also pledged to appoint a new Defense Advisor to represent the US Mission to ASEAN to improve coordination and share information for maritime security, disaster response, and humanitarian activities.

Under President Donald Trump (2017 - 2020), the US uses SLD as an essential security cooperation channel. At the 16th SLD (June 2017), the US publicly supports ASEAN's centrality role in the regional security architecture. Along with the above statement, US Defense Secretary J. Mattis has been frankly opposed to China's blatant encroachment on international law, declaring in favor of an area order that was built based on the rule of law, and announced the plan to send their troops to the Asia - Pacific area. Accordingly, the US will transfer 60% of the Navy, 55% of the Army force, and 2/3 of the Marine force to the Asia - Pacific (Nguyen Ngoc Anh 2017: 38). From the 17th SLD (2018), the US has gradually established a common voice with European countries in the freedom of navigation issue in the East Sea. With the support activities from France, the UK, and recently the Netherlands and Germany, the US urged European countries to work together to carry out regular "patrols" in the East Sea. The moves, as mentioned above, show the positive and decisive character and the significant role and influence of the US on regional security, especially East Sea issues and ASEAN's central role.

After promoting the "Pivot" to Asia strategy and signing ASEAN's Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC - July 2009), the B.Obama administration has quickly integrated ADMM + and EAS (2010). The content of these new mechanisms reflects the current and rapidly evolving situation of a complex security environment in Southeast Asia and East Asia from the beginning of the twenty-first century to the present. ADMM+ is an official ministerial-level multilateral cooperation mechanism dedicated to security and defense. At ADMM +, the content of cooperation includes policy dialogue and practical activities implemented (includes: drills on the sand - table and in the field). Thanks to that, the US military and armies of Southeast Asian countries can train together, build confidence and habits of cooperation. Dialogue and exercises within the framework of ADMM + contribute to capacity building and enhancing interactions among member countries in addressing shared security challenges, especially the security of the East Sea. Together with SLD, ADMM + provided an additional opportunity for US Defense Ministers to go to Southeast Asia, exchange views with all of their key counterparts in the region, and articulate the

vision of the US government on regional security and building personal relationships. In the framework of ADMM +, the US participated in 2 large-scale anti-terrorist battles in Indonesia (2013) and Brunei (2016), contributing to the improvement of the combat capabilities of the anti-terrorist forces of Southeast countries. Asia (Nguyen Thi Thu Huong 2017: 61). The US attended the East Asia Summit (EAS) as an official member from the 6th EAS (November 2011) in Bali, Indonesia. With a diversity of cooperation content, focusing on 17 areas, and an annual forum for dialogue on strategic issues at the head of state level of Southeast Asian countries and major partners, the EAS is the fundamental pillar in the regional security structure. As a result, joining the EAS is a way for the US to regain a legitimate position in regional diplomacy, understanding the security challenges that Asia is facing and understanding thoroughly the internal and outside political dynamics in Southeast Asia as well as in East Asia (Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences 2009: 151). Participating in EAS is an effective way for the US to be deeply present in Southeast Asia's political-security architecture.

It can be said that the active participation in and active operation in ASEAN-led security mechanisms is the fastest and most effective way for the US to establish the foundation for multilateralization of a security cooperation strategy in Southeast Asia in the context of fierce strategic competition between the great powers. However, it should be noticed that these cooperation mechanisms are all open mechanisms with weak legal constraints and the presence of many regional powers (China, Japan, India). Therefore, the major challenge for the US in these mechanisms is to design helpful cooperation options that meet the interests and the need to solve practical security problems of Southeast Asian countries, providing them with substantive confidence and consensus in recognizing the US' vital role in the security and prosperity of the region.

2.2 Launching Initiatives to Promote Multilateral Security Cooperation in Southeast Asia

From the end of the first term, the G.W.Bush administration began to promote multilateral security cooperation initiatives in East and Southeast Asia. In Southeast Asia, the US proactively proposes and implements three important multilateral security initiatives, including Regional Maritime Security Initiative (RMSI), Southeast Asia Maritime Security Initiative (MSI), and Lower Mekong Initiative (LMI). All of these initiatives focus on non-traditional cross-border security issues. In particular, RMSI and MSI concentrate on maritime security, LMI focuses on economic security, health, and civil issues. In addition, the US participates in other complementary security initiatives such as the Container Security Initiative (CSI) to guarantee the security of seaports and the two Southeast Asian countries, Singapore and Thailand.

RMSI was launched in March 2004 by Admiral Thomas B. Fargo, Commander of the US Pacific Command (USPACOM), to develop partnerships with countries in the Asia-Pacific region in the detector, track and prevent transnational security threats in the strait. Although it goes beyond Southeast Asia, RMSI is powerfully deployed by

the US in this region - where the arterial maritime routes such as the Strait of Malacca and East Sea are present, closely linked with the US and its allies interests, are facing many security threats, especially terrorism, piracy, maritime resource disputes, and serious territorial disputes... For the US, even these Southeast Asia shipping routes (including the Sea East) accounts for only 4% of US trade (Nguyen Hoang Giap et al. 2007: 136) but ensuring they are smooth is a key benefit to the development of the entire marine trading system in East Asia (especially energy, military equipment trade), ensuring freedom of navigation security and maintaining the US influence in the region. Outside the US, the members of RMSI in Southeast Asia are Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand. Initially, RMSI cooperation included information sharing, early warning to combat marine security threats but was later expanded to include: joint patrol, technical assistance, and human training. However, the issue is “who will act as a backup force in the strait?”

Furthermore, who will order if something goes wrong?”. These are related to national sovereignty and perceptions about security and the security capacity and responsibility of the strait states, especially Indonesia and Malaysia. Therefore, while Singapore welcomed Indonesia (2004), then Malaysia (2005) rejected the US proposal of a joint patrol under the RMSI (AlfredDaniel Matthews 2011: 54). They thought that this US proposal had denied security capacity and violated the sovereignty of the strait states. Therefore, the operational content of RMSI is narrowed down and cannot be maintained for long. However, RMSI is closely related to the “Popular Security Initiative” (PSI) in East Asia - aimed at preventing the proliferation of WMD, targeted by the US for security purposes in Northeast Asia. According to security experts, RMSI was part of the new US maritime and defense strategy transition under President G.W.Bush (Kwa Chong Guan 2007: 134-145). RMSI is one of the ways to help the US adapt to a grand strategy in Southeast Asia in the new security context.

MSI was officially announced by the US Secretary of Defense - Ash Carter - in June 2015 at the 2015 Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore. MSI aims to assist Southeast Asian countries in building collective capacities to coordinate to address a wide range of maritime security challenges, mainly in the East Sea. MSI was included in the Department of Defense Asia-Pacific Maritime Security Strategy by the US administration in August 2015 and granted 425 million USD for 5 years, starting from fiscal 2016 for deployment on behalf of is part of the Defense Authorization Act. Specifically: 2016: 50 million USD, 2017: 75 million USD, and 100 million USD for each year 2018, 2019, 2020 (Prashanth Parameswaran 2016). MSI is also called the “East Sea Initiative,” which the US applies to countries along the East Sea, including Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam. The items supported by the US through authorization to the MSI’s members are small-scale military equipment, supplies, training, and construction. In addition to the member countries mentioned above, Brunei, Singapore, and Taiwan also participate in MSI as

“supplementary sponsor countries” and may be involved in MSI’s training and other activities. MSI focuses on enhancing regional maritime domain awareness (MDA) and moving towards establishing a common operating picture (COP) in Southeast Asia. The establishment of COP is one of the four contents of the goal of building “lines of effort” of the US in Southeast Asia. The three remaining contents are strengthening the US military capacity, taking advantage of military diplomacy, and strengthening regional security institutions. Through funding for building maritime security capacities for Southeast Asian countries, MSI is a commitment of sustainable resources of the US to partners in the challenging budget environment. This initiative represents the US administration’s “rebalancing” effort in Southeast Asia and is a US step towards expanding its security partnership network to realize its broad strategic goals in East Asia. MSI also affirmed the trend of multilateral security cooperation of the US. MSI is promoted by the Donald Trump administration (and the incumbent President J.Biden administration) in the context of complicated East Sea security with increasingly aggressive behaviors and militarization tendency from China.

To promote multilateral cooperation in civil security in the Mekong sub-region, the US initiated the LMI in 2009. LMI aims to promote cooperation and assistance of the US to the Lower Mekong countries (Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, and Myanmar⁴) on the environment, health, education, and infrastructure. Through the LMI, the US has proposed and funded many projects to help Southeast Asian countries improve their capacity to manage and efficiently use natural resources from the Mekong River, promote agricultural economics, develop energy markets, respond to disasters & epidemics, empower women and develop sustainable infrastructure ... Under the LMI framework, from 2009 to 2020, the US launched many valuable initiatives such as the “Mekong Forecasting Program” (2009), Initiative of the Partnership between the Mekong River Commission (MRC) and the Mississippi River (2010), the “Water and Food Security” program in 2012. LMI is seen as evidence demonstrating the determination to “return to Southeast Asia” by the B.Obama Government. The D.Trump Administration has continued to pursue LMI with the prominent proposal of the 2017 Mekong Water Resources Data Initiative (MWDI). These assist countries in collecting and sharing information for sustainable water management, especially in the context that China’s energy development by hydroelectric dams upstream poses a severe threat to people’s lives in downstream countries. US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has continuously attended the 11th LMI Foreign Ministers Meeting (August 2018) and the 12th (8-2019). In particular, at the 12th LMI Foreign Ministers Meeting, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo announced that the US would join Japan to establish the “Japan-US - Mekong Power Partnership” (JUMPP) to support the Mekong

⁴ Three years after the establishment of the LMI, Myanmar just joined and became an official member of this initiative at the 2020 Mekong River Initiative Conference at the level of Foreign Affairs in Cambodia, on July 13, 2012.

countries to ensure energy security sustainably. As a result, LMI is well received by the member countries. It can be said that this is an important geostrategic security initiative of the US in South East Asia because it opens the way for the US to penetrate into the Southeast Asian continent, develop soft power and strengthen the indispensable role of the US in this region.

2.3 Hosted and Participated in Joint Exercises with Southeast Asian Countries

Since the early 1980s, the US has focused on implementing joint exercises with Southeast Asian countries, first of all with traditional allies (Thailand, the Philippines) in a bilateral manner. From the beginning of the twenty-first century to the present, along with the development of regionalism and the complexity of the security environment in Southeast Asia, the US has increased its development and participation in multilateral joint exercises with Southeast Asian countries. By 2020, the US has conducted many multilateral exercises with Southeast Asian countries. In which, the four most critical multilateral drills include: “Cobra Gold” - upgraded to multilateral since 2000 with the participation of Singapore in addition to the US and Thailand armies⁵; “Southeast Asia Cooperation and Training Exercise” (SEACAT); COPE Tiger exercises and ASEAN - US Maritime Exercise (referred to as AUMX). In which, “Cobra Gold” is the largest annual multi-modal exercise of the US in Asia, mobilizing from 3,600 to 5,500 soldiers from the Army, Navy, and Marines and many of the most modern weapons of America. SEACAT⁶ is the US’s only annual multilateral naval exercise in Southeast Asia (with 8 Southeast Asian countries: Thailand, the Philippines, Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia, Brunei, Cambodia, Vietnam, and 2 South Asian countries (Bangladesh and Sri Lanka.) COPE Tiger is considered Southeast Asia’s most prominent multinational air drill and includes humanitarian projects, community activities, helping people (Thailand), health care, and cultural exchanges among participating countries. With these exercises, the US formed a multipurpose security partnership network that could effectively cooperate on a large scale in Southeast Asia. On that basis, the bilateral security alliances have also been strengthened and expanded.

The most prominent event in US multilateral security cooperation in Southeast Asia was the first maritime exercise between the US and 10 ASEAN countries (ASEAN - US Maritime Exercise, or AUMX for short) in September 2019⁷. This exercise is aimed at “enhancing the combat together skills of ASEAN and the United States” and “not against or targeting anyone else,” as US Rear Adm. Murray Joe Tynch, US navy’s Western

⁵ Initially, “Cobra Gold” was a military exercise bilateral between the US and Thailand, held since 1982.

⁶ SEACAT was developed in 2012 from the SACAT- Southeast Asia Cooperation Againsts Terrorism exercise between the US Navy and 6 Southeast Asian countries, namely Thailand, Singapore, Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines. SACAT started in 2002

⁷ AUMX was first proposed at the Association of Southeast Asian Nations Defense Ministers’ Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus) in 2017 and confirmed during the 12th ADMM in October 2018.

Pacific logistics group commander in Southeast Asia, said. However, no one can deny the significance of this exercise. The AUMX and the exercises mentioned above are both a strong US commitment to Southeast Asian partners, affirming the US's pillar role in the regional security order and the most powerful deterrent to China's ambitions.

2.4 Impact on Vietnam

The US is a major power factor that significantly influences the security and development of Vietnam's defense. Although established on a challenging foundation and started later than other fields, cooperation between the United States and Vietnam in the field of security and defense since the beginning of the twenty-first century has developed rapidly and positively⁸. For Vietnam, the US is the earliest power to develop the Defense Strategy Dialogue (2010) compared to other major partners such as Russia, China, and Japan. Through these cooperation mechanisms, the US holds an important position in security-defense policy-making (especially after the two countries established the Comprehensive Partnership 7-2013) and factors that directly impact the implementation of security-defense goals in Vietnam. The most important objectives are: strengthening defense potential and defense personnel capacity; modernizing weapons and defense equipment; foreign defense - security; and the settlement of the East Sea issue (Bui Thi Thao 2016: 17-21). From the beginning of the twenty-first century up to now, along with the GWBush administration's implementation of the war on terror, Vietnam was mentioned for the first time in the US National Security Strategy to strengthen the "Asian Alliance"⁹. Accordingly, the content of US-Vietnam security-defense cooperation was extended out of the framework of a bilateral settlement of war legacy issues during the period 1991-2000 and strengthened through multilateral cooperation. Therefore, enhancing multilateral security cooperation with the US and Southeast Asian countries is essential content in Vietnam's foreign security-defense policy and has a direct and vital impact on Vietnam's national security.

In the first two decades of the twenty-first century, Vietnam has been present in most of the multilateral security cooperation mechanisms that the US participates in and implements in Southeast Asia except the RMSI security initiative (for the Strait countries as Malacca and Singapore) and COPE Tiger exercises (for the air force of Thailand and Singapore). In particular, it should be seen that the majority of multilateral security initiatives and multilateral exercises in Southeast Asia have only

⁸ After laying the foundation by the annual exchange mechanism at the Department level in 1997, up to now, the US and Vietnam have 3 mechanisms for security-defense cooperation: Bilateral defense dialogue (The US Pacific Command presides over, since 2005); Political - Security - Defense Dialogue (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the two sides preside over, since 2008) and National Defense Policy Dialogue (Ministry of Defense of the two countries preside over, since 2010).

⁹ See the US National Security Strategy, June 2002 <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/nsc/nss/2002/>. Accessed 25 March 2020

been promoted by the US since the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, with the fierce expansion of the influence of China, especially in maritime security and the East Sea issues. As a state in a territorial dispute with China, participation in US-led security initiatives and multilateral exercises profoundly impacts Vietnam.

On the positive side: multilateral security cooperation with the US helps Vietnam supplement cooperation content that the bilateral channel of the two nations does not have or have but not fully. On the other hand, joining the US in multilateral mechanisms helps Vietnam quickly integrate into the regional and international security cooperation environment as a partner with a unique historical relationship. Thereby, the two countries continue to build, consolidate strategic trust and support each other's international role. The US is also a significant power factor, helping Vietnam realize important (tangible and intangible) security goals, especially dealing with major security threats, maintaining a peaceful environment for modernizing the country, doing a foreign policy of peace, neutrality, integration, and integration enhancement of national position.

On the negative side: Because the US-Vietnam relationship in security-defense faces many obstacles and develops later than other traditional partners of the US (Thailand, Philippines, Singapore...), in many multilateral cooperation mechanisms with the US, Vietnam joined later than neighboring countries. Therefore, Vietnam must quickly settle the preparations and concentrate many resources to catch up with cooperation progress. Pursuing these multilateral security mechanisms could scatter Vietnam's national security goals over a given period. More importantly, Vietnam is deeply affected by the increasingly comprehensive and US-China solid strategic competition. Vietnam's participation in multilateral security cooperation mechanisms, especially maritime security initiatives and joint exercises with the US, may cause an adverse reaction from China, especially between Vietnam and China are in a complicated sovereignty dispute over the East Sea. Choosing a cooperation mechanism with appropriate participatory modalities, demonstrating a neutral foreign policy, cooperating in good faith and without harming economic relations with China is a challenge for Vietnamese policymakers.

3. Conclusion

Multilateral cooperation has been a strategic priority trend developed in the US security policy towards Southeast Asia from the beginning of the twenty-first century to the present. Then we are actively implementing this trend in Northeast Asia and in the entire Indo-Pacific region. This is a fact that reflects the development of "Security Pluralism" increasingly deployed by the US in the first two decades of the 21st century under the impact of increasing number and degree complexity of threats and cross-border security challenges in East Asia. Multilateral security cooperation is an indispensable method of the US and more indispensable for small and medium

Southeast Asian countries to minimize disadvantages in the goal of countering hegemonic ambitions by grand strategies of China. It is also suited in the context of the explosion of multilateral cooperation mechanisms in Asia from the beginning of the twenty-first century to the present. From President GWBush (2001-2009) to D. Trump (2017-2021) and present (2021), when President J. Biden continued to pursue the Free and open Indo-Pacific strategy with a comprehensive awareness of security challenges; multilateral security cooperation will be the “way of working of the US with the world”¹⁰ in the future. There, Southeast Asia will continue to be the US area to deploy a solid military-security presence for two major goals: freedom of navigation and control of regional order, against all hegemony ambitions to change the status.

Multilateral security cooperation mechanisms that the US participates in Southeast Asia diversified form, size, and mode of implementation. More importantly, the content and target of these mechanisms are essential for Southeast Asian countries because they create a functional interactive environment in various security aspects, making a significant contribution to prevent and solve common security threats. However, most of them tend to focus more on security-defense than on other areas. The majority of security-defense mechanisms reflect a characteristic of the US security policy towards Southeast Asia, especially when this region is witnessing fierce competition among great powers, a military modernization trend taking place firmly, and security-military solutions are recognized as a deterrent effective immediately. However, non-traditional security challenges, especially climate change, pandemics, biological risks, and high-tech security, will focus on the US and Southeast Asian countries in the medium-term future. In Vietnam, multilateral cooperation with the US is an important content in the defense - foreign security policy. The promotion of this cooperation content not only reflects the development of the Comprehensive Bilateral Partnership between the US and Vietnam but also Vietnam's security strategy to actively take advantage of opportunities for active cooperation to build a strong defense - security, protect national interests and implement a balance of powers foreign policy to assert the nation's position in regional security conditions, and the security of the East Sea are extremely complicated, danger.

¹⁰ In the US “Interim National Security Strategic Guidance” published on March 3, 2021, the new J. Biden administration showed the inevitability of multilateral security cooperation by asserting: “... Recent events show all too clearly that many of the biggest threats we face respect no borders or walls, and must be met with collective action. Pandemics and other biological risks, the escalating climate crisis, cyber and digital threats, international economic disruptions, protracted humanitarian crises, violent extremism and terrorism, and the proliferation of nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction all pose profound and, in some cases, existential dangers. None can be effectively addressed by one nation acting alone. And none can be effectively addressed with the United States on the sideline”(p.7). Source <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/NSC-1v2.pdf>. Accessed 15 April 2021

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