

## THE CONCEPT OF MIDDLE POWER'S THEORY TO REALITY: PROSPECT OF VIET NAM

**Abstract:** *The middle power is playing an important role in the order of international relations. Its voice is being identified in global issues from security cooperation, **political, economic** to environmental and **humanity protection**, and the trend of cooperation with peaceful, stable and mutual development. Although the concept of middle power has been discussed very early and received a great concern from many theorists and foreign policy makers, there has not been a unified definition, which becomes a limitation in explaining the behaviors of some countries towards global multilateralism. This article clarifies the theoretical framework of the concept, approach, and analysis of the middle power in the current international relation context as well as gives some comments about power shift, development trend to generalize these into characteristics and comparison tools for the case in Vietnam, serving **Vietnam's** foreign policy implementing process in the year to come.*

**Key word:** *Middle power's, International Relations, Vietnam Diplomacy*

### 1.INTRODUCTION

In the early years of the twentieth century, the concept of middle power began to gain more attention in the changing international political landscape. The term “middle power” or “medium country” is popularly discussed in academic and political-diplomatic forums, but so far there are many conflicting views and no consensus has been reached on this concept. This term is often used interchangeably with a number of terms such as: middle-class country, second-class power, emerging power... this has proved difficult to give an accurate description of the concept.

The Oxford Dictionary defines a middle power as “a country with moderate political and military influence in international affairs” (Barber, K.1998, p. 28). However, this concept has not yet explained or provided a standard for determining the average or mid-range level. In addition, Encyclopedia Britannica has also defined that: “a mid-range country is a country with a position in the international power scale in the middle - below the level of a superpower, which affects all other countries, or major powers, and have the ability to shape international affairs (Baç, Meltem M. 2018). In this concept, the concept of “mid-range” has been clarified in relation and relativity in the structure of the international power hierarchy, but it has not been defined as “the ability to shape international affairs” as what yet. In countries such as Canada and Australia using “middle power” in claiming non-permanent membership in the United Nations Security Council for mid-range states and their representation in institutions and in UN agencies

such as Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), World Health Organization (WHO) (Glazebrook, D. 1947, p. 307-308). Especially after the 2008 world financial crisis, the concept of middle power was widely used in the foreign policy of Korea, Indonesia, Turkey and South Africa, and that reality is posing a challenge which is an increasing demand for research to reach a general consensus on the concept of a middle power.

On the basis of my extensive study of middle power, I believe that there are three ways to ensure the most profound understanding of the concept of middle power: (1) attempt to quantify the basis of economic potential ; the military and population sizes of these countries; (2) determining middle power through action in international affairs: the ability to build and form alliances in the direction of multilateralism, to resolve disputes through peaceful negotiations; and (3) determine the attitudes and roles of countries towards global issues. According to this understanding, we can give the following definition: Mid-range powers are countries with economic, military and population potential below the level of superpowers, capable of building alliances in the direction of pluralism, settlement of national disputes through peaceful negotiations, and good performance of roles, responsibilities and membership in global affairs.

In current mid-power research, there are four basic approaches associated with the rise of dominant schools of thought in the field of international relations: (i) the functionalism of liberalism. This theory, which flourished between the two world wars, is based on the diplomatic practices of typical middle powers such as Canada and Australia. Accordingly, the function is used as a tool to assert their desired position and role in the international arena; (ii) the realist theory of the hierarchical approach to influence on the system. In this approach, the focus is on a combination of factors: position (national position in the international ranking scale), quantitative competitiveness and national strength – “strength of the country” (Holbraad, C. 1971, p. 76). they possess and the power they possess” in comparison with superpowers and smaller states), matter (material production) and structure (multipolar, bipolar, or unipolar). in the international relations system); (iii) the constructivist approach to identity and behavior. Accordingly, a middle power is a self-made identity or ideology, that is, behaving like a middle power or claiming to be a middle power. This approach explores how a country has built its image (identity society) as a mid-range power and how this self-perception has been implemented in policy behavior towards foreign country; (iv) Neo-Marxist approach to systematic hegemonic structural theory. This school considers complex international relations connecting the social classes of different countries (Cox, R. W. 1983, p. 171).

Schools of thought have different approaches to the middle power matter in response to their own research requirements. Starting from multi-dimensional angles has created dissimilarities in coming to a common consensus in understanding this concept.

However, researchers all acknowledge certain principles and criteria in determining the middle power, according to which the middle powers need to ensure their position, capacity, quantity, attitude and behavior in international relations. On the basis of studying the above approaches, I think that the concept of middle power that I propose is appropriate in the current context.

## **2. The role of a middle power in modern international relations**

The world is going through a period of great, complex and unpredictable changes. Large countries have made many strategic adjustments, both cooperating, compromising, competing, fighting to contain each other, gaining positions and interests, further complicating the situation in many regions and countries. Ethnic, religious, international terrorism, local war, economic war, cyber war, intervention activities, subversion, civil disobedience, sovereignty and territorial disputes, resources ... takes place in new, more intense forms. Global issues and non-traditional security such as: food security, energy security, water security, financial security, cyber security, climate change, natural disasters, epidemics, etc. developments are becoming more and more serious. Populism, great powerism, libertarianism and neo-liberalism have increased dramatically in international relations. International law and global multilateral institutions are facing major challenges. In the current context of fluctuations and power shifts, middle powers play a very important role.

*First*, the middle powers have **an increasing contribution** to the world economy, accelerating the process of narrowing the gap between rich and poor with economic superpowers such as the US, China, Japan and Germany or group of G20 countries and developing countries. In general, the middle powers are all developed economies (in the OECD), with high average income, typically Australia, Canada, the Netherlands, Sweden, Norway... Depending on the level of development, the middle powers will play their own roles in the regional and global production value chains. In some areas of regional value chains, the middle powers have replaced the role of big powers in maintaining stability and growth. For example, mid-sized powers such as South Korea and Indonesia always have high creativity, adaptability and capacity in the field of technology development, able to compete directly with the United States or Japan. Vietnam has a number of fields that are able to compete directly and replace China in the “china + 1” policy, especially the wave of relocating factories and factories from China to Vietnam after the pandemic.

*Second*, the middle powers play a mediating role in bridging the differences in international relations. Mid-range powers are actors with creative skills, institutionalizing agreements, mediating conflicts, and brokering overlapping interests between stakeholders on a particular issue. In this position, the middle powers act as guardians of multilateralism, globalization, free trade, peace, freedom and democracy. The middle

powers are increasingly having a clearer voice in international relations, France, Canada, Indonesia... are increasingly playing an important role in political discussions and global issues through parallel channels. Brazil, India and South Africa are more interested in building institutions that support regional interests and the African Union (AU); as well as multilateral institutions in the form of IBSA, BASIC and BRICS (Acharya, A 2014, p. 3). Both Brazil and India have proposed becoming permanent members of the United Nations Security Council, as well as reforming the rules of the World Trade Organization as representatives of the countries of the South (Efsthopoulos, C. 2011, p. 86); Mexico and Turkey perform their role as regional dispute resolution convening parties; which includes Mexico's involvement in Cuba, Guatemala and Chile (Pellicer, O 2006, p. 2-4); Turkey's peaceful mediation role for conflicting parties in Sudan, Egypt, Libya and Syria (Bechev, D. 2011, p. 173).

*Third*, the middle powers are the bridge in discussing and solving global problems. It can be affirmed that the middle powers are the countries that are most enthusiastic and aggressive towards the issues of world terrorism, environmental pollution, climate change and poverty... developing countries with superpowers in discussing and solving global problems.

Fourth, middle powers are eager and often take the lead, participating in regional and world structures. For example, with Nigeria being the driving force in the establishment of the Economic Association of West African Nations, Malaysia has always demonstrated a strong commitment to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and has proposed the creation of a group of East Asian economies excluding the United States, or the creation of the MERCOSUR Single Market as a result of bilateral initiatives undertaken by Brazil and Argentina; Argentina sought to strengthen the normative structures and responsibilities of the Organization of American States, thereby becoming the 'diplomatic bridge builder for the new regionalism of the Americas.

### **3. The reality and prospects of Vietnam's mid-power diplomacy**

In recent years, many domestic and international researchers have considered Vietnam as a mid-range country. The Asia Power Index rankings of the Lowy Institute (Australia) in 2018 and 2019 both ranked Vietnam in the mid-range group (Lowy Institute. 2019). At the 2013 ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting, Vietnam was assessed as a rising middle power (Chen, S and Gopal Ratnam. 2020). Research by scholar Barbara Kratiuk (2014) suggests that Vietnam should be considered as a middle power, because it has met the criteria of capacity and has an active political will to participate in regional and international affairs (Kratiuk, B. 2014). Similarly, two scholars Raft Emmers and Sarah Teo (2014) also selected Vietnam as one of four case studies of middle powers in the Asia-Pacific region after realizing that Vietnam (together with Indonesia) meets 4

criteria of a mid-range country while only 3 criteria of a small country are satisfied. In terms of self-construction of national brands, scholar Leif Eric Easley (2012) soon stated that Vietnam is building the national identity of a middle power, reflected in the interactions within Global governance and East Asian regionalism. Especially when referencing Cooper's concept of a mid-power with an approach to status, norms and behavior. Vietnam is a country that meets the conditions of standing between superpowers and developing countries. Specifically, Vietnam is the country with the largest population, ranked 15th in the world, with a young, healthy and dynamic population, the driving force for the development momentum to become the leading stable and sustainable growth model. In the world, Vietnam is one of the leading dynamic economies in Asia, has the ability to adapt and recover quickly from global fluctuations and is increasingly contributing to the process of global economic integration. Currently, Vietnam is one of the five countries that ensure the development of a free, high-growth economy in the Asia-Pacific region, becoming one of the leading alternative production centers of Asia. According to the Research Institute of Lowy Asian Power Index in 2020, Vietnam ranks 12th out of 26 countries in the region in terms of comprehensive strength, 11th in terms of military potential, and is a great mid-range power in Asia.

Vietnam has an extremely important geostrategic position, acting as a bridge for mainland and maritime Southeast Asian countries with the central position of Southeast Asia. Unlike the long-running strained relationship between China and Taiwan and the volatile inter-Korean relationship, Vietnam is the country that has successfully achieved the balance of power between the United States and China. The regional context and the emergence of the Indo-Pacific region have been bringing more opportunities to Vietnam, becoming the region's strategic position in creating favorable conditions for Vietnam's economic growth. Interests of major powers in the region, such as Japan, South Korea, India and Australia, which are working to strengthen their engagement with ASEAN.

On the diplomatic forum, Vietnam constantly affirms its position in the international arena, the diplomatic voice of Vietnam has been recognized on global forums, especially the positive and proactive integration with the international community, spirit of commitment for a peaceful and prosperous world. Vietnam's diplomatic discourse has demonstrated an ethical and credible commitment to regional security and economic cooperation associated with a foreign policy of multilateralization and diversification of international relations, as a friend with all countries, Vietnam has taken advantage of the United Nations forum as a basis to strengthen ties with organizations in the United Nations system, expand bilateral and multilateral relations with other countries and international organization. The most outstanding activity in this period is that Vietnam has successfully completed the task of being a non-permanent

member of the UN Security Council for the 2008-2009 term; actively negotiated and became a full member of the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) in 1998, participated in negotiations and was one of the first countries to sign the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) in 1996, participated and became a member of the Conference on Disarmament (CD) in 1996.

In recent years, Vietnam continues to actively participate in the joint efforts of the United Nations in solving regional and international peace and security issues, promoting human rights: Vietnam has appointed 243 turns of military officers in individual positions on duty at the UN Peacekeeping Missions in South Sudan, Central African Republic and the Department of Peacekeeping at United Nations Headquarters. Vietnam has been elected as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council (term of 2020 - 2021) with a record high number of 192/193 votes in favor and is the ASEAN Chair in 2020. According to the behavioral approach, Vietnam has made efforts and pursued multilateralism in solving regional and global issues, corresponding to the application of “international citizenship” as a guiding star for its foreign policy. Vietnam's prestige has been markedly enhanced after its significant contributions to regional peace, such as playing an active role in organizing the US-North Korea Summit in February 2019 and taking advantage of its role of ASEAN chair in promoting centrality in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. In the field of technology development, Vietnam has gradually built and perfected its own infrastructure platform, ready to be deployed to put into commercial operation of the 5G network in 2021. Viettel Group has cooperated with Ericsson to build its own 5G technology, and plans to expand service offerings to Myanmar, Laos and Cambodia. Vietnam has also provided low-cost Internet services to its people, and aims to become an important player in e-commerce and online payment methods. After Ericsson, Nokia, Huawei, Samsung and ZTE, Viettel is the sixth manufacturer in the 5G race, an impressive result for a country that 40 years ago suffered from food shortages. Especially, the wave of production migration is moving rapidly from China to Vietnam, predicting that in the future Vietnam will become a great production site of the region and the world. On the basis of the above analysis, it can be affirmed that Vietnam is an emerging mid-range power in Asia, with great prospects to become a middle power country in the world.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The concept of middle power, although used quite early from the early years of the twentieth century, has not yet reached a general consensus in the understanding of researchers and leaders of countries. Academic efforts that have partly clarify the connotation of this concept have also not come to a basic definition due to the inconsistencies in quantitative perspectives and criteria for determining position of power

in the international order of power or the expression of foreign policy behavior. Based on the theoretical background of researchers and the behavioral practice of middle-class countries such as Canada, Australia, Korea, Indonesia, Malaysia..., we have proposed a new concept of middle-power as a country with economic, military and population potential below the level of a superpower, capable of building alliances in the direction of multilateralization, settling national disputes through peaceful negotiations, performing well the role of, accountability and membership on global affairs. From this concept and discussions in international forums, we affirm that Vietnam is an emerging middle power in the Asian region, with great prospects to become a middle power in the world.

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