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Which factors drive defence technology cooperation between Vietnam and the United States?

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Abstract

This empirical study investigates the primary factors driving defence technology cooperation between Vietnam and the United States by quantifying the correlation between maritime security pressure, the imperative need for defence technology modernisation, and non-traditional security challenges. Employing a deductive quantitative methodology, the study utilises an expert survey to overcome the scarcity of public defence data. Primary data was collected from a cohort of 150 domestic Vietnamese experts—comprising policymakers, defence lecturers, and military analysts—residing and working entirely within Vietnam. The measurement instrument, a twenty-one-item questionnaire, was analysed through reliability testing, exploratory factor analysis, and a multivariate linear regression model. The statistical findings reveal that all three independent variables significantly and positively impact the level of defence cooperation. Maritime security pressure exerts the most dominant influence on strategic decisions (standardised coefficient: 0.496). This is followed by the critical need for modernisation of defence technology (standardised coefficient: 0.385). Furthermore, non-traditional security challenges maintain a statistically significant impact (standardised coefficient: 0.341) as an essential trust-building mechanism. The empirical results illustrate a sophisticated small-state hedging strategy profoundly shaped by Vietnam's "Four No's" defence policy and the dialectical guideline of "cooperation and struggle." While maritime pressure drives internal threat perceptions, actual cooperation is intentionally calibrated towards non-traditional security and law-enforcement capacity-building. This allows a middle power to manage asymmetrical relations, enhance internal self-reliance, and cultivate strategic trust without committing to rigid or polarising military alliances.

Keywords:

maritime security, defence cooperation, hedging strategy, asymmetrical relations, defence technology

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Introduction

In the 21st century, the Indo-Pacific region has become the epicentre of global strategic competition, fundamentally reshaping international security and economic architectures. The rise of the People's Republic of China and the rebalancing efforts of the United States place Southeast Asian nations, particularly Vietnam, in a pivotal geostrategic position. The regional landscape is currently characterised by a whirlwind of challenges, including transactional diplomatic approaches from major powers, the imposition of reciprocal tariffs, and enduring flashpoints, such as the South China Sea maritime disputes (Ong-Webb, 2026, p. 5). Despite these immense geopolitical pressures, Southeast Asian nations have demonstrated remarkable resilience, taking decisive steps to strengthen regional architecture, reinforce the centrality of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and solidify relationships with middle powers to preserve strategic autonomy (Ong-Webb, 2026).

According to Womack (2008, p. 2), the United States has long viewed relationships in this region through the lens of global strategy and power asymmetry, wherein the policies of smaller states are often heavily influenced by their proximity to larger powers. Within this complex context, the partnership between Vietnam and the United States has evolved significantly from former adversaries to a comprehensive strategic partnership. However, force modernisation and defence cooperation are continuous long-term processes rather than short-term outcomes resulting solely from this recent diplomatic upgrade. Vietnam seeks to navigate this asymmetrical environment by adhering to its long-standing strategic guideline of "cooperation and struggle" to firmly protect its independence and strategic autonomy while maximising partnership benefits (Pham and Nguyen, 2021).

Alongside traditional geopolitical factors, bilateral defence cooperation is profoundly influenced by shifting global economic architectures and conflicts. The imposition of Western sanctions on Russia has disrupted Vietnam's historical reliance on Russian military technology, accelerating the imperative to diversify defence suppliers (Grossman, 2022). Furthermore, intersecting economic pressures, such as shifting trade policies and reciprocal tariffs involving major trading partners, require Vietnam to carefully balance its growing trade surplus with the United States against its broader security architecture. Building modern armed forces in this environment requires not only traditional military assets but also access to new technologies, artificial intelligence (AI), and cybersecurity capabilities (Minh *et al.*, 2025, p. 5).

Simultaneously, non-traditional security challenges, ranging from natural disasters to transnational crimes, have emerged as a critical foundation for building trust between the two nations. The State of Southeast Asia 2026 Survey Report indicates that 51.7% of regional experts evaluate issues of maritime encroachment in exclusive economic zones and continental shelves as a top concern while concurrently ranking the United States as the second most important strategic partner in the region (Lin *et al.*, 2026, p. 12).

Although the security relations between Vietnam and the United States have attracted significant attention from international scholars, previous studies have primarily employed qualitative methods based on diplomatic discourse analysis (Hoang and Do, 2016, p. 180; Trinh and Ho, 2024, p. 122). Very few studies use quantitative empirical data to measure the specific impact level of emerging drivers, such as the need for defence technology modernisation and non-traditional security challenges. To fill this academic gap, this article poses the following primary research question: How does the convergence of maritime security pressure, the need for defence technology modernisation, and non-traditional security challenges shape Vietnam's defence cooperation strategy with the United States?

The core objective of the study is to quantify and evaluate the correlation between these three aforementioned variable groups and the substantive level of bilateral defence cooperation. The remainder of the article is structured as follows: Literature review, Theoretical framework and research model, Methods, Results, Discussion, and Conclusions.

Literature review

Research on the defence relationship between Vietnam and the United States is typically approached through three main lenses: traditional maritime security, defence technology modernisation, and non-traditional security cooperation. This section reviews the existing literature across these domains to identify the current academic gaps.

Maritime security pressure and geopolitical competition

The first lens focuses heavily on maritime security pressure and the structural dynamics of major power competition. Scholars argue that increasing geopolitical competition in the South China Sea acts as a primary structural driver, propelling the convergence of strategic interests between Vietnam and the United States (Luu and Nguyen, 2023; Trinh and Ho, 2024). Analyses done by Grossman (2018; 2020) alongside Poling *et al.* (2021) emphasise that this strategic convergence is predominantly based on the shared objective of maintaining freedom of navigation. Specifically, Grossman (2018; 2020) underscores the critical question of whether Vietnam military capabilities can effectively stand up to assertive actions in the South China Sea, thereby driving the necessity for strategic deterrence (Poling *et al.*, 2021). The State of Southeast Asia 2026 Survey Report reinforces this perspective by indicating that encroachments in the exclusive economic zones and continental shelves represent the greatest strategic concern for littoral states, with 51.7% agreement at the regional level and a striking 66.3% among experts in Vietnam (Lin *et al.*, 2026). Furthermore, as Ong-Webb (2026) notes, the persistence of the South China Sea maritime dispute remains one of the most destabilising factors in the region, compelling regional actors to seek external balancing mechanisms to safeguard their territorial integrity. However, these studies rely primarily on the qualitative analysis of diplomatic discourse and historical events, without quantifying the specific impact level of this traditional security factor on defence cooperation decisions compared with other emerging variables. From the perspective of the United States, securing freedom of navigation and upholding the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea within exclusive economic zones constitute a foundational strategic objective. This diplomatic approach mirrors US strategies in other contested maritime domains, such as the Eastern Mediterranean, where international law serves as a primary stabilising mechanism against unilateral coercion (Ploumis, 2020).

Imperative of Defence Technology Modernisation

The second lens examines the need for modernisation of defence technology. While previous studies often emphasised traditional geopolitical variables (Hoang and Do, 2016), an extensive body of specialised analysis significantly broadens this perspective. Thayer (2018) details a continuous trajectory of force modernisation efforts within Vietnam over the past decade, shifting beyond conventional procurement. Concurrently, Abuza (2025) provides critical assessments detailing the profound transition of the Vietnam People's Army towards comprehensive military modernisation. Furthermore, Burgess (2021) underscores the indispensable role of specific branches, such as air force relations, in advancing the bilateral comprehensive partnership. Building upon these foundational

military needs, recent academic literature highlights the central role of technological autonomy. Vuving (2023; 2026, p. 330) asserts that in the new era of world politics, the relationship between Vietnam and the United States has reached a new state, wherein efforts to enhance self-reliance, economic resilience, and technological cooperation play a foundational role. Aligning with this perspective, Minh *et al.* (2025) assert that mastering strategic technologies, such as artificial intelligence, autonomous equipment, and cyberspace security, is a mandatory requirement for building modern armed forces capable of addressing multi-domain threats. Furthermore, the political stability and economic rise of Vietnam provide the necessary domestic foundation to absorb and integrate these advanced technologies (Le, 2026). Nevertheless, there remains a distinct lack of empirical evidence to measure the priority level of the technological factor compared with traditional security pressures, leaving a gap in understanding how technology transfer needs to drive contemporary defence diplomacy.

Furthermore, the operationalisation of technology transfers is strictly governed by the US statutory frameworks, detailed comprehensively within the Security Assistance Management Manual (Defense Security Cooperation Agency [DSCA], 2020). The US Department of State (2024) oversees these overarching security and defence cooperation policies. For partner nations, translating strategic alignment into tangible military capabilities relies heavily on specific legal mechanisms, notably foreign military sales and excess defence articles. As observed in comparative international contexts, adapting and rebalancing these security cooperation programs is essential to fulfill the specific force modernisation requirements of partners operating in fast-changing geostrategic environments (Ploumis, 2018).

Non-Traditional Security and Trust-Building Mechanisms

The third lens focuses on non-traditional security challenges and the mechanisms of trust-building between former adversaries. Cooperative efforts to address climate change, conduct search and rescue operations, and particularly remediate war legacies are viewed as indispensable tools to neutralise past historical enmity and build mutual confidence (Dang and Nguyen, 2019, p. 125). A study conducted by Gammon and Phan (2024) provides a crucial demonstration of this argument by analysing how the two nations implement "strategic remembering." The authors indicate that reshaping the meaning of war monuments and addressing war legacies is not merely a historical acknowledgement but also an active tool for peaceful diplomacy, marking a new reality in bilateral relations. These cooperative activities in non-traditional fields serve as essential stepping stones to consolidate trust before expanding into more complex and sensitive traditional security agreements.

Overall, the existing literature provides a multidimensional framework of arguments regarding the drivers propelling bilateral relations. However, the majority of these works exist as qualitative studies and examine the maritime, technological, and non-traditional factors independently. This study fills that gap by synthesising the three aforementioned variable groups into a unified quantitative model to determine the precise impact weight of each factor on the decision to promote substantive defence cooperation.

Theoretical Framework and Research Model

Theoretical framework

This study constructs its analytical foundation by integrating the theory of asymmetrical relations (Womack, 2008) with a meticulously operationalised small-state hedging strategy and Vietnam's distinct defence doctrines. In an asymmetrical power structure,

a smaller state manages disparities by pursuing autonomy while utilising larger partners for capacity-building. Rather than treating hedging as a generic behaviour, this research unpacks the strategy through a synthesis of fifteen distinct elements identified by leading scholars (Table 1).

Vietnam applies a sophisticated combination of these elements, heavily informed by two core national doctrines. The first is the "Four No's" policy articulated in the 2019 National Defense White Paper. This policy mandates no military alliances, no siding with one country against another, no foreign military bases, and no using force in international relations (Ministry of National Defence, 2019, pp. 23–24). This strict policy of nonentanglement serves directly as a dominance denial and balancing mechanism within its hedging strategy (Zeberlein, 2024). Consequently, to dilute dependency and avoid great power entrapment, Vietnam has successfully diversified its strategic alignments, elevating fourteen nations to comprehensive strategic partnerships rather than exclusively aligning with the United States.

The second foundational doctrine is the dialectical principle of cooperation and struggle formalised at the Eighth Plenum of the Communist Party Central Committee in 2003 and further detailed in Resolution 28-NQ/TW in 2013. This guideline dictates that partnerships and adversities are not binary concepts. Vietnam seeks to expand friendly cooperation with partners while remaining vigilant, actively struggling against any forces infringing upon its independence, sovereignty, or territorial integrity (Pham and Nguyen, 2021). This nuanced framework perfectly explains why bilateral defence cooperation concentrates heavily on selective capacity-building and non-traditional security issues rather than rigid mutual defence treaties.

Research model and hypotheses

Building upon this theoretical foundation and a comprehensive review of reputable academic literature, the study proposes a quantitative research model comprising three

Table 1. Fifteen elements of small-state hedging strategies.

Hedging elements	Contributing scholars
Hard balancing	Hiep, 2013; Vuving, 2023
Indirect balancing	Kuik, 2016
Soft balancing	Goh, 2005; Hiep, 2013; Leng, 2017
Deterrence	Leng, 2017
Dominance denial	Kuik, 2016
Influence denial	Leng, 2017
Binding engagement	Kuik, 2016
Complex engagement	Goh, 2005; Hiep, 2013
Direct engagement	Hiep, 2013; Kuik, 2016
Economic pragmatism	Hiep, 2013; Kuik, 2021
Engagement	Vuving, 2023; 2026
Enmeshment	Goh, 2005; Vuving, 2023
Limited bandwagoning	Kuik, 2016
Solidarity	Vuving, 2023
Deference	Vuving, 2023

independent variables impacting one dependent variable. The operationalisation process of these variables is rigorously constructed to ensure empirical validity.

- First independent variable: Maritime security pressure. This variable group measures experts' perceptions of the increasing level of strategic competition, collision risks at sea, and the imperative to protect exclusive economic zones and continental shelves. According to the State of Southeast Asia 2026 Survey Report, maritime security pressure is identified as the paramount security risk governing strategic decisions in the region, reflecting deep anxieties regarding territorial sovereignty and international law (Lin *et al.,* 2026). From the perspective of asymmetrical relations, mitigating these direct territorial threats necessitates external capacity-building support. Therefore, the first hypothesis is posited. Hypothesis 1: Maritime security pressure has a positive impact on the level of bilateral defence cooperation.

- Second independent variable: Need for defence technology modernisation. This variable evaluates the absolute necessity of acquiring advanced dual-use technologies, including maritime surveillance systems, artificial intelligence, and cyberspace security. As Vuving (2026) articulates, strategic partnerships in the new era of world politics require nations to enhance their technological autonomy and economic resilience. The integration of this variable into the model accurately captures the paradigm shift from the procurement of traditional lethal weapons to the mastery of digital defence technology, which serves as a subtle yet effective deterrence mechanism. Consequently, the second hypothesis is formulated. Hypothesis 2: The need for defence technology modernisation has a positive impact on the level of bilateral defence cooperation.

- Third independent variable: Non-traditional security challenges. This variable group quantifies the importance of soft cooperative activities, such as responding to climate change, search and rescue operations, and, crucially, the remediation of war legacies. As demonstrated by Gammon and Phan (2024), efforts to address historical war legacies alongside handling non-traditional challenges serve as a core diplomatic tool for "strategic remembering" and building solid strategic trust. These non-antagonistic areas of cooperation provide a politically safe avenue to maintain the regular engagement of the United States in the region without triggering security dilemmas. Thus, the third hypothesis is established. Hypothesis 3: Non-traditional security challenges have a positive impact on the level of bilateral defence cooperation.

- Dependent variable: Level of defence cooperation. This variable reflects the overall assessment by surveyed experts regarding the substance, depth, effectiveness, and sustainable prospects of security agreements within the framework of the comprehensive strategic partnership between these two nations.

Methods

Research design and data-collection procedure

This study applies a quantitative method through an expert survey. The selection of this method stems from the specific nature of defence diplomacy, where policy-making documents and strategic agreements are often highly classified, leading to a severe scarcity of public macro datasets. In this context, an expert survey provides the most feasible and reliable alternative tool to quantify strategic drivers by capturing the perceptions of individuals deeply knowledgeable about foreign policy.

The study utilises non-probability sampling combined with the snowball sampling technique. The research acknowledges the inherent limitations of this technique, particularly the risk of selection bias, as participants may tend to refer peers with similar professional backgrounds or ideological perspectives. Consequently, this study does not claim absolute statistical generalisability to the entire national population. However, in research on international relations, this is the most practical approach to reach a specialised, small-scale, and hard-to-access population, such as security policymakers. The results of the study serve as an in-depth exploratory assessment of a specific elite expert cohort.

Data was collected from 150 experts who are entirely Vietnam citizens, residing and working within Vietnam. The fundamental rationale for this sampling strategy is to capture the authentic internal perspective of the host nation regarding its foreign policy and defence modernisation. By focusing exclusively on domestic perspectives, the study illuminates the internal strategic calculus of Vietnam, providing a necessary counterbalance to analyses heavily reliant on foreign intelligence or external diplomatic viewpoints. To ensure reliability of the survey sample regarding a highly complex topic, the educational level criterion was rigorously controlled, with 86.6% of participants holding postgraduate degrees. Specifically, master's degree accounts for 57.3% and doctorates and above account for 29.3%. In terms of professional structure, the survey sample is transparently distributed into three groups representing multidimensional domestic perspectives. Policymakers account for 34.0%, lecturers directly teaching and researching national defence and security education make up 37.3%, and analysts of domestic international relations alongside military officers comprise the remaining 28.7%.

Regarding research ethics and data security, the survey strictly adhered to the established academic protocols. All 150 respondents were provided with clear guidelines outlining the academic purpose of the research prior to participation. Informed consent was obtained under the guarantee of absolute anonymity. No sensitive personal identification information was collected. The raw dataset is securely stored in encrypted formats accessible only to the primary research team, completely mitigating any risks associated with data privacy.

Measurement instrument

The measurement instrument is a questionnaire comprising twenty-one observed variables, utilising a 5-level Likert measurement scale (ranging from 1 being strongly disagree to 5 being strongly agree). The scale structure is operationalised into three independent variable groups: maritime security pressure (five variables), the need for defence technology modernisation (five variables), and non-traditional security challenges (five variables). The dependent variable, the level of defence cooperation, is measured through six observed variables. To ensure absolute transparency of the quantitative research, the full text of the survey questionnaire is provided in detail in the Appendix of the current article.

It is crucial to note that the questionnaire employs a deductive research design. The items were not arbitrarily formulated but were strictly operationalised from established international relations theories, particularly the hedging strategy and asymmetrical relations frameworks. Translating qualitative theoretical propositions into quantifiable Likert scale statements is a standard methodological procedure to statistically test predefined hypotheses. This structured design ensures that the measurement focuses precisely on testing theoretical correlations rather than conducting exploratory qualitative interviews.

Data analysis method

All raw data was coded and processed using the open-source statistical software jamovi (The jamovi project, 2024). The analytical procedure was executed through three rigorous steps: first, reliability testing using Cronbach's alpha (α) coefficient; second, testing convergent and discriminant validity using exploratory factor analysis; and third, applying a multivariate linear regression model to test the research hypotheses.

Results

Demographic characteristics of the survey sample

The results of descriptive statistics in Table 2 present the structure of the 150 experts participating in the survey. Regarding gender, males account for 68.0% (102 individuals) and females account for 32.0% (forty-eight individuals). Regarding age, the sample is concentrated in groups of experts with extensive experience, specifically from 30 to 45 years old (40.7%) and from 46 to 60 years old (24.7%). The even distribution among professional groups and the overwhelming proportion of those with postgraduate degrees (86.6%) ensure a solid professional foundation for the collected data.

Reliability testing and exploratory factor analysis

The results of the Cronbach's alpha reliability analysis show that all four measurement scales ensure a high level of internal consistency. Specifically, the maritime security pressure variable group reaches 0.882; the defence technology modernisation needs variable group reaches 0.908; the non-traditional security challenges variable group reaches 0.892; and the level of defence cooperation variable group reaches 0.912. The item-rest correlation coefficients of the observed variables are all greater than 0.3, meeting the standard for further analysis.

The exploratory factor analysis (using the minimum residual extraction method combined with a Promax rotation) shows that the Kaiser Meyer Olkin coefficient reaches 0.875. Bartlett's test of sphericity yields a Chi-square value of 1,978 with 210 degrees of freedom

Table 2. Demographic characteristics of the expert survey sample. Source: Research survey data.

Features	Classification	Frequency (individuals)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	102	68.0
	Female	48	32.0
Age	<30 years	27	18.0
	30–45 years	61	40.7
	46–60 years	37	24.7
	>60 years	25	16.7
Educational level	Bachelor's	20	13.3
	Master's	86	57.3
	Doctorate and above	44	29.3
Professional group	Policymakers	51	34.0
	Lecturers and researchers	56	37.3
	Analysts and military officers	43	28.7

(DoF), achieving a statistical significance level of $p < 0.001$. This result proves that the data is perfectly suitable for conducting factor structure analysis.

Multivariate linear regression analysis

A multivariate linear regression model was utilised to test impact level of all three independent variables on the dependent variable. The F-test of the model reaches a value of 48.9 ($p < 0.001$), affirming that the regression model fits the dataset. The adjusted R^2 coefficient reaches 0.491, indicating that the three independent variables explain 49.1% of the variance in the level of defence cooperation. The multicollinearity check shows that the variance inflation factor (VIF) index of the variables ranges from 1.01 to 1.02, completely ruling out the risk of multicollinearity.

The analytical results in Table 3 indicate that all three independent variables have a positive impact and are statistically significant ($p < 0.001$) regarding the level of defence cooperation. Among them, maritime security pressure has the largest impact level (standardised coefficient: 0.496). This is followed by the need for defence technology modernisation (standardised coefficient: 0.385). The non-traditional security challenges variable has the lowest impact level in the model but still plays a crucial role (standardised coefficient: 0.341).

Discussion

The results of the quantitative analysis from the multivariate regression model provide empirical evidence regarding the driver structure of defence relationship between Vietnam and the United States. The convergence of all three factors, comprising maritime security pressure, the need for technology modernisation, and non-traditional security challenges, reflects a multi-layered cooperation strategy. Comparing these statistical results with theoretical lenses and previous international studies helps to clarify the nature as well as the limits of bilateral relationship in the digital age.

The shaping role of maritime security and the comparison with alliance theories

The research results indicate that maritime security pressure is the variable with the largest impact on the cooperation decision (standardised coefficient: 0.496). This finding shows alignment with macro-data from the State of Southeast Asia 2026 Survey Report,

Table 3. Multivariate linear regression analysis results. Source: Research survey data (N = 150).

Independent variable	Unstandardised coefficient	Standard error	Standardised coefficient	*t*-value	Significance level (*p*)	95% Confidence interval (95% CI)
Constant	–1.017	0.4184	–	–2.43	0.016	–
Maritime security pressure	0.533	0.0630	0.496	8.46	<0.001	0.380–0.611
Defence technology modernisation needs	0.352	0.0537	0.385	6.56	<0.001	0.269–0.501
Nontraditional security challenges	0.348	0.0601	0.341	5.79	<0.001	0.225–0.458

in which 66.3% of experts in Vietnam rank the risk of encroachments in the exclusive economic zone and continental shelf as the greatest security threat (Lin *et al.*, 2026).

When comparing this result with traditional neo-realist theories—which often predict that an increase in security pressure leads to the formation of formal military alliances—the data suggests a different trend. Through the lens of the asymmetrical relations theory proposed by Womack (2008), this cooperation can be interpreted not as a process of taking sides or allying against a third party. Instead, the smaller-scale nation tends to manage asymmetry by maintaining autonomy while utilising resources from the external major power to ensure the principle of freedom of navigation. This finding highlights the limits of linear perspectives when predicting that Vietnam is moving towards a comprehensive military alliance with the United States.

The convergence of strategic interests requires active engagement from both nations. Bilateral defence relations are firmly anchored in institutional frameworks, specifically the Memorandum of Understanding on Advancing Bilateral Defense Cooperation initiated in 2011 and updated in 2022, alongside the Joint Vision Statement on Defense Relations signed in 2015 and refreshed in 2024. In practice, the United States utilises the excess defence articles mechanism to transfer assets, such as Hamilton-class cutters. These transfers significantly bolster Vietnam civilian maritime law enforcement capabilities rather than providing direct military deterrence. Additionally, approved foreign military sales, such as T-6C Texan trainer aircraft and prospective C-130 transport aircraft, illustrate a pragmatic and highly calibrated approach to capacity-building (Nguyen, 2026). This precise calibration aligns perfectly with Vietnam's independent foreign policy while addressing immediate maritime security pressures.

However, a critical empirical paradox emerges when comparing these survey results with actual procurement patterns. While experts identify maritime security as the paramount pressure, the United States has not transferred highly lethal combat platforms to Vietnam. Instead, cooperation relies heavily on non-traditional security issues and the transfer of law-enforcement assets, such as Hamilton-class cutters, which are designed for civilian maritime patrol rather than naval deterrence against major powers. Concurrently, Vietnam actively acquires core defence technologies and lethal weapons from other international partners, including India, Israel, South Korea, and European nations.

This apparent contradiction perfectly illustrates the operationalisation of Vietnam hedging strategy and its strict adherence to the "Four No's" policy. While the survey accurately captures the profound internal perception of maritime threats, translating this concern into actual defence cooperation with the United States is intentionally restrained. Vietnam deliberately avoids procuring sensitive lethal weapons from Washington to prevent triggering a severe security dilemma or provoking neighbouring powers. Acquiring law-enforcement vessels allows Vietnam to protect its exclusive economic zone without crossing the threshold of military alignment. Simultaneously, diversifying lethal weapon procurement to less geopolitically polarising partners serves as an optimal indirect balancing tactic. Consequently, non-traditional security cooperation remains the most politically viable avenue to maintain the US engagement in the region.

Defence technology needs and shift in the research paradigm

One of the contributions of this study is quantifying the impact level of the defence technology modernisation needs (reaching an impact coefficient of 0.385). When compared

with previous literature that limits the analysis of defence relations to traditional geopolitical frameworks or lethal weapons procurement, the quantitative results show an expansion of cooperative areas.

This finding provides empirical support for the argument provided by Vuving (2026) that bilateral relations have entered a new era, where self-reliance capacity and cooperation in advanced technology play a central role. The experts' attention to artificial intelligence, autonomous equipment, and cyberspace security reflects an effort to diversify supply sources and master technologies. Technology cooperation can be viewed as a tool to support the military modernisation goal while maintaining safety limits in relations with neighbouring countries.

Non-traditional security: From humanitarian meaning to a strategic balancing tool

Although the non-traditional security challenge has the lowest impact weight in the model (0.341), this variable maintains statistical significance ($p < 0.001$). Previously, some studies often evaluated non-traditional cooperation primarily in humanitarian aspects. However, when comparing the statistical results with the concept of "strategic remembering" discussed by Gammon and Phan (2024), a more multidimensional strategic perspective is presented.

The authors suggest that jointly resolving war legacies not only addresses past issues but is also utilised as a diplomatic tool to guide the future. The quantitative data of the study supports this argument: in the context where differences in political viewpoints persist, less sensitive areas, such as search and rescue, military medicine, and particularly war legacy remediation, act as a trust-building mechanism. They serve as strategic stepping stones, providing a basis to maintain regular presence of the United States in the region, creating interaction space before advancing to more extensive security agreements.

Research implications and limitations

Regarding theoretical implications, this study contributes to establishing an operationalisation process of the "hedging strategy" concept into measurable variables. Practically, comparing the driver weights assists policymakers in interpreting why the contents of the comprehensive strategic partnership focus on dual-use technology transfer and enhancing maritime law enforcement capacity rather than mutual defence commitments.

The process of interpreting the results also requires considering certain limitations. The snowball sampling method may contain risks of selection bias, although the sample was controlled with a high percentage of experts holding postgraduate degrees. Furthermore, the adjusted R^2 coefficient reaches 0.491, indicating that the model explains 49.1% of variance in the dependent variable. This implies that the remaining 50.9% of variance is subjected to the impact of variables not included in the model, such as differences in ideological value systems or the impacts of polarisation in global power competition. Future studies can continue to expand to evaluate the structure of this complex relationship more comprehensively.

Conclusions

This empirical study contributes to the research paradigm on defence relations between Vietnam and the United States in the digital age by quantifying political

and security drivers. The results of data analysis from the multivariate regression model indicate that the substantive level of bilateral defence cooperation is simultaneously influenced by maritime security pressure, the need for defence technology modernisation, and non-traditional security challenges. Among these, maritime security pressure plays the most dominant role, while the need to acquire strategic technology and non-traditional cooperation serve supporting and trust-building functions.

This relationship reflects the essence of a sophisticated hedging strategy. The research results suggest that Vietnam utilises resources and technological cooperation with the United States to enhance its internal self-reliance capacity and protect independent interests without engaging in antagonistic military alliance structures (Womack, 2008). Although the bilateral relationship has been established within the framework of the comprehensive strategic partnership, the trajectory of defence cooperation continues to operate within the boundaries of an independent and autonomous foreign policy. Both nations prioritise non-confrontational areas of cooperation to maintain structural stability in the region amidst complex power competition among major states (Vuving, 2026).

In conclusion, shifting from qualitative analyses to a quantitative measurement model contributes a new empirical perspective to the academic literature. The findings of the study indicate that the defence diplomacy strategy of a middle power in an asymmetrical relationship is constituted by a balance between defensive responses to traditional pressures and trust-building efforts through non-traditional channels.

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Author Contributions

Conceptualisation, P.N.; methodology, P.N.; software, P.N.; validation, P.N.; formal analysis, P.N.; investigation, P.N.; resources, P.N.; data curation, P.N. and D.T.Q.; writing—original draft preparation, P.N. and D.T.Q.; writing—review and editing, P.N.; visualisation, P.N.; supervision, P.N.; project administration, P.N.; funding acquisition, P.N. Both authors read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Data Availability Statement

The data presented in this study is available on request from the corresponding author.

The data is not publicly available due to the confidentiality assurances given to the surveyed experts.

AI Disclosure Statement

During the preparation of this manuscript, the authors used Grammarly for language editing (grammar, spelling and readability). The authors reviewed, verified and revised the resulting output and take full responsibility for the content of the manuscript.

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Appendix: Survey Questionnaire

Note: All items were measured on a 5-level Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Group 1: Maritime Security Pressure

1. The state of strategic competition among major powers in the Indo-Pacific region is increasing strongly.

2. The risk of collisions and tensions in the South China Sea is currently high.

3. The US assistance to Vietnam in increasing maritime domain awareness is necessary.

4. Vietnam needs to enhance the capacity of its maritime law enforcement forces to respond to coercive behaviours.

5. Pressure from the maritime security environment is a key driver, promoting Vietnam to expand security cooperation with the United States.

Group 2: Need for Defence Technology Modernisation

6. Receiving the transfer of surveillance technology and autonomous equipment from the United States is extremely necessary for Vietnam.

7. Integrating artificial intelligence into defence systems is an urgent requirement in the digital age.

8. Vietnam needs to share technology and experience from the United States to improve cybersecurity capabilities.

9. Strategic technology transfer plays a breakthrough role in Vietnam's goal of building a modern military from 2030.

10. The US technology security network meets Vietnam's needs for defence technology autonomy very well.

Group 3: Non-Traditional Security Challenges

11. Cooperative activities to respond to climate change are an important priority in bilateral relations.

12. Joint search and rescue and humanitarian assistance activities are becoming increasingly practical.

13. Cooperation in ensuring water security requires active engagement and resource-sharing from the United States.

14. Continuing cooperation in addressing war legacies (MIA accounting and demining) remains the core foundation for maintaining the relationship.

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15. Cooperation in resolving non-traditional security challenges plays the role of a catalyst to consolidate trust towards deeper agreements.

Group 4: Level of Defence Cooperation (Dependent Variable)

16. The current level of defence cooperation between Vietnam and the United States is highly substantive.

17. Bilateral security cooperation activities are highly effective and meet mutual interests.

18. The depth of strategic engagement between the two countries has improved significantly in recent years.

19. Bilateral security commitments and agreements have very sustainable development prospects in future.

20. Upgradation to a comprehensive strategic partnership has created major opportunities for Vietnam to effectively manage geopolitical risks.

21. The two countries are coordinating effectively in maintaining a rules-based regional order and ensuring freedom of navigation.