

Current Structural Movement in Asia-Pacific Region and Vietnam's Policy Responses

Tran Nam Tien

Assoc. Prof., PhD, University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vietnam National University Ho Chi Minh City

Email: trannamtienqhqt@gmail.com

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Abstract: *While the structure in the Asia-Pacific region in the first two decades of the twenty-first century was dramatically influenced by the rise of a new contending power (China) alongside the incumbent (United States), it is forecast to be greatly affected by the strategic competition between these two powers as well as the participation of the others in the third decade. The paper, based on theories of structure, assesses the current structural movement in Asia-Pacific region, thereby making preliminary predictions about its transformation in the 2020s decade. Vietnam's present and future policy responses are also taken into consideration.*

Keywords: Regional Structure, The Asia-Pacific Region, the United States, China, Vietnam

1. "Structure" in International relations theory and current practice in the Asia-Pacific region

a) Perception of "Structure" in international relations theories

It is said that "structure" itself is an abstract term with many different interpretations, which is still creating strong controversy in academia. Traditional international relations researchers consider structure as a part of an international system. From the systems theory approach, "A system is a group of interacting elements. At one level, the system consists of a structure, and the structure is the systems-level component that makes it possible to think

of the units as forming a set as distinct from a mere collection. At another level, the system consists of interacting units" (Waltz, 1979b: 38-59). In other words, the structure is a method of organizing related elements within a system and is combination requirements of the system existence for its elements (Hoang Khac Nam, 2009: 3-13). Besides, the structure represents an organizational model, the correlation of the factors in the system, and the overall of compulsory and constraints stemmed from the existence of the system with the elements of the system (Vu Duong Huan, 2011: 197-198). Moreover, based on a traditional view of systems and

structure, the structural power approach becomes one of three important power approaches¹.

Nevertheless, difficulties in the distinction between system and internal changes are considered a limitation in the theory of the traditional system. Therefore, Kenneth N. Waltz proposed the concept of “structure” in international relations as follow: (i) Structure is defined according to the principle of systematic arrangement; (ii) Structure is determined by functional specialization of different units; (iii) Structure is defined based on the distribution of power among units (Waltz, 1979a: 79-101).

The concept of “regional architecture” is first introduced and commonly used in ASEAN documents. The regional architecture is formed by two main parts: bilateral relations and multilateral institutions on political security and economic aspects through multilateral institutions. According to ASEAN’s approach, the concept of “regional architecture” focuses more on the technical aspect than that of systems theory in international relations studies. Therefore, ASEAN focuses on building multilateral institutions with the participation of various countries both within and outside the region, aiming to ensure peace and security in Southeast Asia and the broader Asia-Pacific region (Anthony, 2014: 563-584; Pinthong, 2015: 17-22). In general, studies on the structure is an important part of understanding the international

system. In other words, the structure of international relations is power center and the surrounding factors are determined by the distribution of power by stakeholders in the system and the political power of these actors. The division and operation of power in the structure form a certain system in a geographical area. Especially, from the realism approach polarization represents the number of countries using power in the system with three main types of polarization: unipolar, bipolar, and multipolar.

b) Current regional architecture in Asia - Pacific

Geographically, the Asia-Pacific region includes Northeast Asia, Southeast Asia, a group of islands in the Pacific Ocean, and the Americas belt located on the Pacific coast. On the geopolitical front, the region has an important position covered by oceans. The region is also widely known for its rich resource, especially oil and gas reservoirs. Since the Cold War in 1991, the emergence of a “power vacuum” has facilitated the Asia-Pacific region to emerge as one of the most dynamic economic development regions in the world. The Asia-Pacific region’s rapid and dynamic economic development in the post-Cold War era shows shifts of the world’s economic focus from the Atlantic to Pacific region in the context of geopolitical considerations are being replaced by geo-economic approach, at a time when economical factors play a prerequisite role for the nation and region’s development (McGrew and Brook, 1998: 62).

Entering the twenty-first century, the Asia-Pacific region has become the world’s

¹ The three main approaches to power in international relations include (i) Elements of national power approach, (ii) Relational power approach, (iii) Structural power approach (See: Hoang Khac Nam, 2011: 10-13).

fastest-growing region with an economic growth rate increasing rapidly compared with other regions. In 2010, China overtook Japan as the largest economy in Asia and the world's second-biggest economy after the U.S. (Chinkin and Baetens, 2015: 126). It is said that the China's rise is likely to offer economic development opportunities for surrounding countries, on the one hand, it, on the other hand, also makes these countries worried by the fierce competition, even overwhelming many problems (Lee, 2016: 137-138). In this context, the regional multilateral cooperation mechanisms are constantly developed, making the possibility of regional "unity" is also increase, attracting the attention of the whole world (Dent and Dosch, 2012: 132-133; Stoltman, 2012: 599).

Contrary to development pattern, the Asia-Pacific region is currently also a center of conflicts in strategic interests among big power countries, especially those facing China's ambitious rise to gain control of the region, both politically and economically (Goh, 2016: 169). Besides, conflicts and disputes over sovereignty and strategic rivalry among countries in the East Asia region are still a source of potential risks of tensions in bilateral or multilateral security relations in Asia-Pacific. The U.S.-China's tensions and conflicts also always contain a "hot war" for related countries such as Japan, Korea, Australia, and ASEAN (Binhong, 2017: 62). Such moves have led to significant security challenges for the Asia-Pacific region. Under the context, the creation of new regional architecture in the Asia-Pacific region has been currently received great attention from governments, politicians, and scholars.

Since the end of the Cold War, the Asia-Pacific region's great powers and organizations have actively launched initiatives on common security architecture, but it does not appear to have been implemented yet. Many researchers argue that the basic pattern of regional architecture built by the great powers remains the same as in the post-Cold War era (Vu Le Thai Hoang, 2011: 203-219). Simultaneously, the fact has shown that the balance of power is moving into new factors such as bilateral relations and multilateral mechanisms.

The Asia-Pacific region's security architecture originated from the Cold War with the pillar of the strategic triangle of the U.S. - China - Soviet Union and the U.S.-led "hub and spokes" bilateral alliances (Gera, 2012: 175). The security landscape in the Asia-Pacific had changed dramatically under the collapse of the Soviet Union after the Cold War. The world's bipolar order replaced by the U.S.-led order with multilateral international relations which both restrains and promotes relationships, most notably the U.S.-Japan-China triangle relationship (Ho Chau, 2006: 4-8). Therefore, since the Cold War, the architecture in the Asia-Pacific region has made significant achievements under the trend of multi-polarization and relative power integration in the region (Nanto, 2008).

There have been always big debates on the Asia-Pacific's security order or architecture in the 21st century due to the global volatilities and new regional patterns. Many scholars agreed to introduce different scenarios based on different variants of the "one superpower and several major powers" order (Vu Duong Huan, 2011: 175). However, some scholars argue that

the regional architecture will move towards a “multi-polar order” in the future. Entering the second decade of the 21st century, the rising China and the U.S. “rebalancing” policy in the Asia-Pacific region have significant impacts on the region’s security landscape (Saunders, 2014: 19-55).

Although the Asia-Pacific region is currently not capable of large-scale wars, the nuclear issue on the Korean Peninsula and sovereignty disputes in the South China Sea are potential risks for regional security and stability. Meanwhile, great powers have also adjusted their strategies to cope with dramatic situation changes in the Asia - Pacific region. In an outlook on new regional architecture in Asia-Pacific, the central tendency on economics is strongly promoted at multi-level and multi-disciplinary, while political links are centrifuged (Chong, 2017: 2). In which, China and the United States will both “cooperate and compete” to demonstrate their pioneering role in the region’s multilateral mechanisms.

For China, leaders tend to favor the formation of a flexible new order based on Hu Jintao’s “Harmonized World” (See more: Nordin, 2016; Baoxu, 2014). However, since coming to power, China’s President Xi Jinping has shown a pragmatic approach in his development policy. Since taking power, Xi Jinping has always put effort to fulfill the “yet-unfinished goals” in the “Chinese Dream”¹. The

“Chinese Dream” is viewed as a doctrine of nationalism and strongly invested by the Chinese government. Scholars argue that the “Chinese Dream” could have dangerous impacts on regional security in the future, especially as it relates to China’s growing military assertiveness in the South China Sea and the East China Sea, and more recently in the Indian Ocean (See: Do Thuy T., 2015: 21-38).

By contrast, the United States focused on building an order based on commitments and laws by networks of traditional allies and new strategic partners. However, the United States tends to favor bilateral strategies for countries in the region such as China, Japan, India, South Korea, and Southeast Asia. Since Donald Trump officially became the President of the United State in January 2017, U.S. policies have become more and more unpredictable due to the parallel interactions between domestic and abroad issues. Accordingly, President D.J. Trump’s administration withdrew from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), paying less attention to the U.S. campaigns and commitments in Asia as part of its “rebalancing” strategy with the Asia-Pacific region in its official statements. This could affect the U.S.’s traditional “hub and spokes” model as the countries in this strategy suffer from the D.J. Trump’s administration adjustments. Although President D.J. Trump has mentioned the concept of “Indo - Pacific”²,

¹ Chinese President Xi Jin Ping articulated main visions: 1) Build a ‘relatively well-off society’ by 2021 on the 100th anniversary of the founding of the Chinese Communist Party; and 2) Transform China into a “fully developed nation” in 2049 on the 100th anniversary of the founding of the People’s Republic of China.

² The United States and Japan have initiated Indo-Pacific Theory to counter China’s Belt and Road Initiative (See: Le Vinh Truong, 2018: 55-67; Muhammad Saeed, 2017: 499-512).

there have not been any specific plans for fostering and forming a “multilateral ecosystem” that is controlled and led by the U.S.

Identifying a new regional architecture or order in Asia-Pacific becomes difficult in the context of the U.S.’s leading role and a rising China. In this context, countries in the region struggle to choose between China and the U.S., which can lead to possibilities of cooperation or conflict under the U.S-China competition’s impacts. As U.S. and China become the two dominant powers in the region, the “cooperation and development” trend still holds an important aspect in international relations which helps to strengthen country-to-country relations in areas through multilateral mechanisms. This trend has also a significant impact on the Asia-Pacific region’s development, so the United States and China cannot ignore or even makes use of multilateral mechanisms to restrain each other. Thus, moves of major powers, especially the United States and China, and multilateral organizations in the Asia-Pacific region have shown that the current regional architecture is a combination of the existing ones (including both security architecture and economic architecture) and new architecture (security and economic complexes). The new regional architecture which is formed in a multi-level, complex, complementary, supportive manner, one the one side, contributes to maintaining the region’s development, and on the other side, potentially threatening peace, stability, and prosperity of the region and the world development.

2. Vietnam in the Asia-Pacific region’s architecture: From a policy perspective

The fact has shown that Vietnam’s security and development has been strongly influenced by changes in the Asia-Pacific’s “architecture” or “power map”. As a region’s member country, Vietnam also takes positive approaches to regional development to take advantage of favourable contexts as well as to avoid negative impacts on the current development in Vietnam under the motto “Combining national strength with the power of the times”.

Based on open thinking and readiness to adapt to the regional and global situation, Vietnam has made positive moves to proactively integrate into the international economy. First, views on international economic integration were expressed since the 11th National Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam: “A multipolar world is becoming apparent, the trend of democratization in international relations has been robust, but major powers will still dominate international relations” (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2011: 183). This view was developed through Resolution No.22-NQ/TW dated April 2013. The gathering of forces among countries continues to be diverse, intermingling between cooperation and competition based on the nation’s strategic, security, economic development interests. In particular, Vietnam affirms four guidelines for dealing with foreign affairs, including: (i) Ensuring genuine national interests, smoothly combining patriotism and internationalism of the working class; (ii) Maintaining independence and self-reliance, promoting diversification and multilateralization of

foreign relations; (iii) Recognizing the two sides of cooperation and competition in international relations for the genuine national interests; (iv) Participating in regional cooperation and expanding relations with all countries, especially balancing relations with major countries (Bui Van Hung, 2011: 39).

In terms of partnerships, based on the policy of building and deepening strategic partners, Vietnam had established strategic partnerships with Russia (2001), China (2008), Japan (2009), India (2007), and comprehensive partnership with the U.S. (2013). In addition, strengthening and developing relations with ASEAN is Vietnam's strategic interests. Vietnam has affirmed the image and prestige as an active, positive, and responsible member, closely connecting and whole-heartedly for ASEAN. Moreover, by dealing with the South China Sea, a central issue in the Asia-Pacific, Vietnam has also shown its role and responsibility for ensuring peace, stability and security, safety and freedom of navigation and over-flight in the region.

From the international aspect, Vietnam has proactively disclosed its sovereignty over its sovereign territories in various forms, contributing to improving the outsiders' awareness of Vietnam's sovereignty over Truong Sa and Hoang Sa archipelagos (Tran Nam Tien, 2017: 249). Such measures have been encouraged by many great powers, including the United States, for strategic and vital interests.

The process of restructuring of the Asia-Pacific region's geopolitics has still been restructured and even pushed more strongly in the future. Like it or not,

Vietnam cannot stand outside this game. However, how to formulate policies and participate in the regional architecture to both maintain independence and autonomy, and protect the integrity of territory, while avoiding conflicts and wars, and maintaining a stable and peaceful environment for development is a significant challenge. Facing a new regional architecture is forming in the Asia-Pacific region, Vietnam must focus on continuing the foreign policy "independence and autonomy", "openness" and "multilateralization and diversification". Moreover, Vietnam needs to promote multilateral diplomacy, attaching its interests to the common interests of the Asia-Pacific region.

Over the years, Vietnam has a positive contribution to the formation of the Asia-Pacific architecture and multilateral cooperation mechanisms for the region's peace and stability. With an appropriate foreign policy, Vietnam has affirmed its role, especially through the ASEAN mechanism. However, Vietnam is also facing big challenges with the global and region's unpredictable fluctuations. Notably, the U.S.'s President D.J. Trump showed the honor of being "present in Vietnam - the heart of the Indo - Pacific region" as he participated in the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Forum in Da Nang in November 2017 (See: Electronic Newspaper of Voice of Vietnam Radio, 2017). Although the D.J. Trump administration does not pay as much attention to Vietnam as his predecessor B. Obama, Vietnam is still seen as a potential partner in the relationship with the U.S. (Le Thu Huong, 2017).

3. Conclusion

Entering the 21st century, China gradually asserts its position and ambition to expand its influence on a global scale. Based on the legacy of the Cold War era, regional architecture in Asia-Pacific continues to moves toward a multi-polar direction with the influence of emerging power (China) and traditional power (the United States). Especially, the Asia-Pacific region's situation has become uncertain since D.J. Trump won the U.S. Presidential election in November 2016. The President D.J. Trump's withdrawal from the TPP was a negative message for the Asia-Pacific region's architecture. Most scholars are not optimistic about U.S.- China relations under President D.J. Trump (Nguyen Ngoc Anh, 2017: 21-33). However, it is undeniable that the regional architecture in Asia-Pacific continue to be impacted by the U.S. and China's situation.

For a long time, the security architecture in Asia-Pacific is an intertwined cooperation with the competition of interests of many countries, a parallel existence of the region's economic architecture. Moreover, a second new world order with no pole can be formed and pushed by excessive ambitions, rapid global changes, and more frequent economic crises (Zlobin, 2012: 368-369). Many researchers also believe that the erosion of the "unipolar order", the "one superpower and several major powers" since the end of the Cold War will begin to lead to the "no pole world order" with various centers of power without there are any centers that exercise global leadership. From a practical perspective, under the contexts of fluctuations and unpredictable in the Asia-Pacific region architecture, Vietnam's

diversification, multilateralization, and expansion policies need to be strengthened on the available platform to protect legitimate national interests. In addition, there is a need to have a more accurate understanding of disputes related to sovereignty over the islands to make appropriate policies as there is a "structural" shift in the Asia-Pacific region □

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