Chapter 7
Vietnam–China Relations in the Context of the COVID-19: Situation and Prospect

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7.1 Vietnam’s Response to COVID-19

At the beginning of 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic which started in Wuhan, Hubei, China has created an unprecedented crisis that influenced people’s lives and weakened the worldwide economy, particularly that of Southeast Asia. The outbreak of Covid-19 is not only a medical and health crisis, but also a serious challenge for economic growth, supply chain, and tourist industry in Southeast Asia. The economic growth in the ASEAN region is likely to stop and drop around 3.7% from the projected growth and only reach 1% growth in 2020. In a worse scenario, some ASEAN countries will have to face negative growth.\(^1\)

Vietnam has been heavily affected by the COVID-19 pandemic due to its long border with China. First of all, the country’s economy is badly damaged. The GDP growth in the first quarter of 2020 is only 3.82%, 5 million workers and 85% businesses meet with adversity, nearly 60% of corporations lack capital and funding and have to cut back their cash flow, the labor force participation rate has dropped to its lowest point in 10 years, and the job deficits rate has reached a climax in 5 years. In April 2020, some manufacturing, trading, and import-export sectors began to experience negative growth. The number of newly-established enterprises decreased for the first time in the period 2015–2020, and the number of enterprises registering to pause their activities has soared. Almost all industries, manufacturing, and service sectors decreased, in which some industries and sectors were stagnant or frozen, with

\(^1\)Economic Impact of COVID-19 Outbreak on ASEAN (2020).

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almost no production and business activities such as commerce, services, tourism and hospitality, transportation (especially aviation), and entertainment.

To revitalize the economy and social welfare, the government proposed 3 groups of solutions with 33 specific objectives in order to make way for production-business, support affected individuals, and some measures to promote disbursing social investment capital, especially public investment capital. Many aiding policies are carried out such as credit packages of 300,000 billion VND, tax support packages of about 180,000 billion VND, social welfare packages of over 62,000 billion VND, electricity bill support packages of 12,000 VND, telecommunications support packages of 15,000 billion VND, and about 20,000 billion VND as an exemption for businesses and people. At the same time, the government put forward 5 comprehensive solutions to stimulate a revived economy, attract investment from domestic and FDI, enhance export and public investment, and encourage domestic spending. Thanks to the pragmatic and drastic policies, Vietnam put an end to the fight against the virus on May 11. When national social distancing was canceled, the Vietnamese students were back to school. Stores and restaurants as well as local markets returned to normal.

With the government’s effort taken to account, Vietnam’s economy is severely hit but definitely not in a major crisis. The country’s macroeconomics within 4 months starting from 2020 remains stable, inflation is controlled and has a downward tendency through each month, and export reached up 4.7%, of which the domestic sector increased 12.1%, trade surplus was about US$ 3 billion. The GDP growth in the second quarter of 2020 increased by 0.36%, and the first 6 months of 2020 increased by 1.81%. Vietnam, therefore, is one of the few countries with good growth rates in the context of the COVID-19 epidemic which is “cutting down” many large global economies. Vietnam is also one of the first countries to get out of the epidemic, establish a “new normal” state without falling into a state of economic crisis and collapse.

The important contents of the domestic economy are balanced and guaranteed. Specifically, Vietnam’s trade surplus reached US$ 4 billion, of which, the domestic export was quite high, up to 11.7%. Total social investment capital in the first 6 months of 2020 at current prices was estimated at 850.3 trillion VND, up 3.4% over the same period in 2019, and equals 33% of GDP, and value-added increased by 2.71%. However, in the first months of 2020, the COVID-19 epidemic has seriously affected commercial and service activities. The service sector in the first 6 months achieved the lowest growth rate of the same period in 2011–2020. Total retail sales of consumer goods and services in the second quarter of 2020 decreased by 5.8% against the previous quarter. The first 6 months of the year were estimated to decrease by 0.8% over the same period in 2019. International visitors to Vietnam were kept tracked at 3,744,500 arrivals, down 55.8% over the same period. The whole country has more than 62,000 newly-established enterprises with registered capital of 697.1 trillion VND and the total number of registered employees is 507,200 employees, down

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2Trong (2020).
7.3% in the number of enterprises, down 19% in capital registered, and decreased 21.8% in the number of employees compared with the same period last year.\(^3\)

FDI in May reached more than US$ 1.55 billion, bringing the total amount of FDI into Vietnam after the first 5 months of this year leaped nearly US$ 13.9 billion. Although the total amount of FDI is only 83% in the same period last year, it still increased higher than the previous years.\(^4\) In addition, the newly registered capital reached US$ 7.44 billion with 1212 projects and 436 projects registered to increase capital, which increased by 15.2%. But the increase is mainly from large projects that have been submitted and negotiated a long time ago, and the number of newly registered projects and adjusted capital decreased.

Since the beginning of the outbreak, the Government of Vietnam has been pro-active and flexible in doing everything possible to confront the epidemic, including promptly detecting and quarantining the source of the infection, and collecting data. In fact, preventive measures in Vietnam were in place more than a month before the COVID-19 was declared a global pandemic by WHO. The early, decisive, and transparent actions of the Vietnamese leaders, together with the solidarity of Vietnamese people, have been the key to Vietnam’s success against COVID-19 to date.\(^5\)

In Vietnam, the coverage was marked with a striking story: every citizen was a soldier fighting a global killer disease-COVID-19 Pandemic.\(^6\) The Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc called on every business, every citizen, every residential area to be a fortress to prevent the pandemic.\(^7\) With the motto “Fighting the COVID-caused disease is like fighting enemies”, the people were unanimous with the direction of the Party and the Government, preventing the risk of infection from outside, resolutely implementing local isolation, social distancing, focusing on the preventing the epidemic from the inside out and actively treating patients, even “sacrificing economic benefits to protect people’s health”.\(^8\) The COVID-19 pandemic is seen as an enemy in public political discourse in Vietnam. Social distancing and handwashing have been described as an indication of patriotism, and this message has been also delivered through popular arts and information campaigns.\(^9\) A viral propaganda poster created by artist Le Duc Hiep conveyed the message that staying at home is loving your country demonstrates that people agree with the Government in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic.\(^10\) The Guardian reported on how Vietnamese artists drew posters and created postage stamps that conveyed “a clear message of solidarity in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic”.

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\(^3\) Thành (2002), Vũ (2020).
\(^4\) For instance, the first 5 months of 2016 reached US$ 10.1 billion, US$ 12.1 billion (2017), and US$ 9.9 billion (2018).
\(^5\) Sang (2020).
\(^6\) Jueni (2020).
\(^7\) Pham (2020).
\(^8\) Môt Việt Nam trong cuộc chiến vớ Covid-19 (2020).
\(^9\) Huong (2020).
\(^10\) Jueni (2020).
Up to July 22, Vietnam had confirmed 408 cases with 746 of the patients had recovered and no deaths recorded. From April 16, there were no transmitted cases within the community except the imported cases. This could be considered a big success, showing the unitedness from thought to the action of the Vietnam political system, as well as the power of Vietnamese solidarity. Most of Vietnamese appreciate government policies in the efforts of stopping and pushing back the epidemic, they strictly followed those policies. According to the survey, 62% of Vietnamese said they agreed with the responses from the government to the COVID-19 pandemic. It could be said that the fight against COVID had contributed to strengthening solidarity in Vietnamese society. Not only that, many businesses and individuals have conducted difficult-sharing activities with the government, helping those struggling in the pandemic. Moreover, the philanthropists have installed rice ATMs to help the vulnerable in the slowing domestic economy. Since May 16, organizations and individuals in Vietnam and overseas have donated US$ 85.6 million to the Vietnam Fatherland Front to fight against COVID-19.

Discourses from the Government of Vietnam expressing concerns in the response to the crisis showed the unique ethical standards of Vietnam. The Vietnam Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc said: “Beside the efforts to deal with far-reaching consequences of the pandemic, countries need to come up with a development plan after COVID-19 whose main focus is to support the businesses restore production and maintain social security, especially those in the vulnerable group, to ensure no one will be left behind”. This is the message sent to overseas Vietnamese who want to return to Vietnam. Aviation agencies operated flights to rescue the Vietnamese citizens trapped abroad devastated by the COVID-19 pandemic. The Government of Vietnam also announced to cover all health care bills and expenses for Vietnamese with COVID-19 symptoms, as well as those who spend 14 days in quarantine. The internet and government-run social media platforms have also played an important role in the Vietnam fight against COVID-19. Official government websites and hotlines, Facebook, Instagram, smartphone apps, and text messages have been utilized in every aspect of Vietnam COVID-19 response. A new program called Người Việt Nam đi du lịch Việt Nam (Vietnamese people tour in Vietnam), issued by the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, is expected to bring the tourism industry back into orbit before COVID-19.

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11 According to the news page on acute respiratory infections COVID-19 of the Ministry of Health, https://ncov.moh.gov.vn/. From the end of July, COVID-19 epidemic burst back in Vietnam from Da Nang city, then spread to some provinces and cities of Vietnam. By the end of August, Vietnam basically controlled the epidemic. As of September 1, Vietnam had a total of 1,044 cases, of which 34 died. The majority of death cases in Vietnam suffered from the aggravation of pre-existing medical comorbidities after being infected with COVID-19 virus. See Bộ Y Tế, Trang tin về dịch bệnh viêm đường hô hấp cấp covid-19, https://ncov.moh.gov.vn/.

12 Pham (2020).

13 Vietnamese PM urges countries to further enhance solidarity amid Covid-19 (2020).
7.2 Vietnam–China Cooperation on Fighting Against the COVID-19

Vietnam has cooperated with China in coping with COVID-19, a common enemy for both sides, ever since its outbreak. Many cross-border meetings between the public health officials of the two countries have been taken. On April 2, Chinese Prime Minister Li Keqiang talked over the phone with his Vietnamese counterpart Nguyen Xuan Phuc. The two Prime Ministers discussed prevention and control measures, emphasized the importance of the bilateral relationship, and affirmed the hope to develop the Vietnam–China comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership relationship towards more practical and greater achievements. Li also expressed support for Vietnam’s effective measures and initiatives in international cooperation and expressed the wish to continue coordinating closely in maintaining trade and investment activities, while preparing to resume tourism, aviation, and people-to-people exchange as soon as the pandemic ends.

Both countries have also supported each other materially. On February 8, Ha Giang Provincial Border Guard Command donated over 1000 medical masks and 20 sanitizers to Yunnan. On February 9, an aircraft of Vietnam Airlines transported medical supplies and equipment to China to support the neighbor amidst the pandemic. On February 10, the Chinese Foreign Ministry expressed gratitude to Vietnam for showing firm support and providing medical aid to the Chinese government. Speaking in a regular press conference in Beijing, Geng Shuang, spokesperson of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs confirmed that medical gloves, masks, and protective outfits donated by the Vietnamese government have arrived in Wuhan, the outbreak’s epicenter. On February 21, The Vietnam-China Friendship Association of Hanoi handed over 1000 masks to the Chinese Embassy in support of the fight against the COVID-19 outbreak. Chinese Embassy Cultural Counselor Peng Shi Tuan said: “Chinese highly appreciate the support from Vietnam government”.

Compared to other ASEAN countries, such as Cambodia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Laos, and Thailand, Vietnam received limited material support from China. Most of the assistance are mainly from April, the second phase of the COVID-19 pandemic in Vietnam. This could be explained by Vietnam’s ability to handle the pandemic on its own, which is more proactive than other countries in Southeast Asia. For instance, the Chinese Ministry of Public Security donated a batch of medical supplies and equipment including masks, goggles, gloves, and protective gear to Vietnamese counterparts in May. Although the Chinese state media widely reported the news, Vietnam official media rarely cited this contribution.

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14 Tú (2020).
15 International assistance to Southeast Asia: China’s ‘Mask Diplomacy’ (2020).
16 China’s public security ministry donates anti-epidemic supplies to Vietnam (2020).
17 Lye (2020, p. 3).
7.3 Vietnam–China Relations in the Midst of the COVID-19

When the COVID-19 first broke out in China, the Vietnamese government had carried out some closure measures, such as closing schools, suspending flight and closing border between Vietnam and China. To be more specific, Vietnam orderly canceled all the flights from China on February 1 due to its concerns about the spread of the COVID-19. Only one day after the Trump Administration announced to tighten restrictions with arrivals from China, Vietnam was one of the very first countries to suspend all flights to China. Meanwhile, Vietnam blocked its 1300-km border with China, causing a large impact on Vietnam’s economy.

At first, Beijing used to view countries that imposed early travel restrictions on Chinese as “being unfriendly”. Actually, early border closure and flight suspension definitely irritated China, which was criticized by the global public as the cause of the global pandemic.18 As Hanoi had already done, China had reacted negatively to the travel restrictions that Vietnam imposed. Chinese scholar Cheng Hanping even confirmed that China accused Vietnam of ordering a “blockade” against China, which “consistent with the U.S moves”.19 However, China’s view gradually changed due to the outbreak of new types of coronavirus outside Chinese territory. In turn, China also issued travel restrictions for foreign visitors including Vietnam. Therefore, Vietnam’s measures are not necessarily considered a negative strategy by Beijing.

Vietnam did not follow the footsteps of U.S. President Donald Trump and French President Emmanuel Macron who criticized China for spreading the virus. Instead, Vietnam has mobilized national resource to contain the pandemic, relied highly on state agencies, and took strictly public health measures. As David Koh said “Generally, Vietnamese respond well to national calls for cooperation if they are sufficiently convinced that there is a national crisis”.20 He added that the Vietnamese government had stuck to positive points to contain the pandemic rather than blaming China as some major countries had done.

In April, Vietnam strictly closed the border and banned nationwide flights. In that case, political relations between Vietnam and China switched back to the disputes on the SCS. It can be said that the Vietnam–China relationship may be greatly affected by China’s military and administrative actions. On April 3, Vietnam accused a Chinese Coast Guard ship of intentionally sinking one of Vietnam’s fishing vessels near the Paracel islands, while China insisted that Vietnamese vessel crashed into Chinese ship. At the end of this month, China named 80 geographical features off the disputed SCS including submerged rocks, and established two new administrative districts in the Paracel and Spratly islands. Both Vietnam and China accused each other of taking advantage of COVID-19 to assert sovereignty.

Le Dang Doanh, a retired adviser to the Vietnam government, said “The calculations between Vietnam and China are very complicated”, “on one hand, the two sides enjoy a very intense economic exchange, and on the other hand, during the pandemic,
Chinese marine patrols have intensified their presence in the East Sea (SCS)”. In spite of the fact that the Secretary General of the United Nations (UNSG) called for a global ceasefire to focus on the true fight with Covid-19 on March 23, China has continued to push its military objectives in the SCS. In practice, the Chinese aircraft carrier Liaoning conducted military exercises to alter this image and to remind that China is still an active and reliable major country for other actors, including regional countries, even Vietnam. The way China had taken advantage of the pandemic to claim its stance and reinforce its territorial sovereignty over the SCS through military operations worsens its national image and is incompatible with the “reassuring” image China tried to show before. Therefore, Vietnam can take advantage of this factor to reaffirm its stance about the SCS and attract global support for its policy.

Besides, Vietnam’s achievement in handling the pandemic has created a positive image in the international community and won plaudits from the world. As taking rotating chairmanship of ASEAN in 2020, Vietnam could play a leading role in using ASEAN as a containment factor against China. However, ASEAN is known for the lack of internal cohesion. Some of the member states have intimate relations with China (such as Cambodia, Laos, and Thailand) and could become effective allies in Beijing. Therefore, Vietnam could find difficulty in calling for consensus when it comes to China. However, Vietnam can take advantage of its chairmanship to promote the negotiation of COC. This would be a great project to inspire some sort of consensus among ASEAN member states. This can also be viewed as an indirect confrontation and is leverage for judicious behavior against China’s aggressive actions on the East Sea (SCS).

In terms of the economic relations, Vietnam and China faces with a temporary halt at some points due to the adverse impact of the COVID-19. Looking at the bilateral trade balance, Vietnam addresses the trade deficit with China, which makes China become one of the most important trading partners of Vietnam. Trading with China plays an important role in boosting up Vietnam’s GDP. Thus, both Vietnam and China would benefit from the reopening borders and remaining trade when the pandemic is put under control. As soon as the situation returned to normality, Vietnam urgently reopened the border and resumed trade with its largest commercial partner-China.

According to the Vietnam General Department of Customs data, in the first two months of 2020, Vietnam–China import-export turnover reached US$ 14.8 billion, which increased by 1%. Considering the first 2 months, Vietnam’s trade deficit with China reached US$ 3.8 billion at the same period with a decrease of 26.5%. The total value of Vietnam’s exports to China reached US$ 5.5 billion, which increased by 16.1%. Some export commodity groups that recorded positive growths include Computers, electronics machinery, and components (reaching US$ 1.4 billion, increased by 36%); phones and accessories (reaching US$ 1.2 billion, increased by 278.3%). There are also groups of export goods that recorded an increase in turnovers such as machinery, equipment, tools, and other components (reaching US$ 220.8 million, increased by 8.1%); iron and steel of all kinds (reaching US$
87.4 million, increased by 1720.4%); rice (reaching US$ 37.1 million, increased by 723.6%).

However, the Chinese government decided to close some of its important border gates by the end of March in an effort to prevent the spread of COVID-19. From March 30, China’s Guangdong province has strengthened prevention and control strategies. Accordingly, China’s customs strictly managed the drivers from Vietnam, those who drivers from the provinces that had reported infected cases would not be allowed to enter China. Such measures lead to an increase in Vietnam’s backlogged goods at the border gates, which cause great damage to Vietnamese enterprises. By the middle of April, the total import–export turnover of agricultural, forestry, and aquatic products decreased by 6.9%.

Vietnam and China has taken various measures to promote bilateral trade and improve the business environment via online platforms since May. In order to increase agricultural and food exports to China, Vietnam Trade Promotion Agency has held a series of online conferences with many Chinese enterprises and signed some contracts with them since May. These mainly included an online conference on agricultural and food products with Yunnan, an online conference on construction materials and interior décor with Guangxi, an online conference on agricultural and food products with Shandong, an online conference on agricultural, aquatic, and food products with Chongqing, an online conference on with Zhejiang on consumer goods.

According to Vietnam Customs, the total import–export turnover between Vietnam and China by May increased by 2% with US$ 44.35 billion. The total value of Vietnam’s export to China increased by 17.4% with US$ 15.975 billion, and its import from China decreased by more than 5% with US$ 28.375 billion. Although Vietnam’s exports to China increased in the first five months of 2020, the export of some agricultural products decreased. Specifically, fisheries decreased by 2.3%, vegetables and fruits decreased by 29.1%, cashew nuts decreased by 30.9%, rubber decreased by 28.2%.

7.4 Vietnam in the Midst of Intense Sino–American Rivalry Under COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has strained the already stiffening US–China relationship to further spiral. Both the US and China have actively offered medical supply to Southeast Asian states in an effort to pursue support from them. In addition, the US which has criticized China for increasing its military presence and sovereignty claims in the SCS has proactively countered China’s assertive activities in the SCS. In a recent controversial attempt to cement its territorial claims in the disputed waters, China named 25 islands and reefs, as well as 50 undersea features in the SCS.

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22Vu Thị Trước, Ươm Châu Phi, Bộ Công Thương, Tình hình xuất nhập khẩu giữa Việt Nam và Trung Quốc trong 2 tháng đầu năm (2020).

23Phùng Nguyên (2020).
China’s extensive maritime claims have created some frictions in the region and led to increasing U.S. military operations. The US has sent two warships to the contested areas and proactively hold joint maritime drills with Australia. U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has accused China of taking advantage of the pandemic situation to threaten states involved in the disputed water, and declared that “The South China Sea is not China’s Maritime Empire.” On May 7 and the following May 12, the U.S. Navy has sent a pair of coastal warships to patrol in the vicinity of West Capella-a Malaysian-contracted drillship that was involved in a standoff with China.

Moreover, the US–China strategic competition has escalated beyond the SCS and extended to the Mekong River. Over the past few years, China has long been criticized for its upstream dam management of obtaining hydro-hegemony over the downstream countries. In April 2020, the American-sponsored consulting company Eyes on Earth pointed out Chinese dams that hold back water in the Mekong River were responsible for damaging droughts in the downstream countries. China also initiated a plan of dredging the Mekong River, so as to make way for commercial ships. Such initiative was met with fierce opposition from the locals for damaging the ecosystem and fish species. In an attempt to counter China, the US has enhanced its interference in the Mekong sub-region. Meanwhile, U.S. allies such as Japan and Korea have also accelerated cooperation with the Mekong Basin countries. Although the economic development in the Mekong sub-region has been promoted by the increasing business activities of outside forces, the rising tensions between the US and China posed a challenge to the Mekong Basin countries.

Due to the intense Sino–American rivalry, Southeast Asian states have sought to separate the territorial disputes and economic cooperation with China. It should be highlighted that China’s development is of vital importance to Southeast Asian countries. China has become the biggest trading partner of ASEAN as a whole and always among the top 3 to the individual members. Many ASEAN countries are involved in China’s BRI, making China the biggest investor in the region. Since Duterte came into office, he tries to set aside territorial dispute on the back-burner

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24 U.S. Embassy in Georgia, “Secretary Pompeo Speech Clip-South China Sea is not China’s Maritime Empire (July 20)”. https://ge.usembassy.gov/secretary-pompeo-speech-clip-south-china-sea-is-not-chinas-maritime-empire-july-20/.

25 However, after the news announced on 13/5, this standoff began to cool off as Chinese ships were moving in a different direction than the drilling ships, which had already completed its itinerary.

26 However, on the contrary of their government, local people are not convinced of China’s action. Polls in the Philippines show that 3 out of 4 Filipinos do not trust China, while some Indonesians have accused China of bringing the virus to their country. Chinese Embassy in Thailand met with angry backlash from the Filipinos after posting a music video on YouTube to highlight China’s efforts to help the Philippines control the pandemic. They argue that the title “One water” of the video is China’s way to claim its territory sovereignty over the disputed water. In Thailand, a cartoon posted on Facebook by the China Embassy that mocks the US’s response to the pandemic has drawn criticism from the Thai people. Some even called it a poor quality propaganda video. Thailand scholar Wasana Wongsurawat from Chulalongkorn University said, “Thais, who oppose the military-backed government, do not buy into the common refrain that China is a good friend of Thailand”. Such discontent stemmed from economic fallout. Fishermen were angry at China taking over their fishing grounds, while the small and medium-sized business owners were dissatisfied with cheap Chinese goods competing amongst theirs over a limited market. Additionally, the fact
to accede in economic development, although his administration still insists on a hostile attitude toward Beijing’s assertiveness. Indonesia, Malaysia, and Brunei has tried to keep their relationship with China in harmony, and avoided direct friction with Beijing as much as possible. For Vietnam, it was cautious not to let the matter of dispute intertwine with other sectors, though has conducted diplomatic actions taking against Chinese assertiveness in the maritime domain.

It is widely said that the COVID-19 has prompted cooperation between ASEAN and China, while the pandemic was spreading along with the wave of anti-Chinese sentiment. In general, Southeast Asian countries expressed great sympathy toward China, in which Malaysia, Philippines, Vietnam, Indonesia, Thailand, and Singapore expressed their support by donating medical supplies to China. A Thailand artist even composed a song to express the solidarity of Thailand and Wuhan. In response, as the virus began to spread beyond the China border, China has provided medical supply and sent experts to Southeast Asian countries to combat the pandemic. The increasing relation of China–ASEAN at multi-levels has demonstrated the urgent need and the benefit of cooperation in times of crisis. For Vietnam, pandemic control and economic recovery are the top priorities. It would be better off for Vietnam if the US and China can facilitate valuable cooperation, overcome differences for common interest. It is well aware that China and the US are the vital strategic partners to ASEAN, and the turbulence in the relationship between the two superpowers will not yield good prospects for ASEAN. As the rotating President of ASEAN in 2020, Vietnam has been working with the member states to implement a master plan for recovery in post-COVID-19 era. Furthermore, it also attempts to prompt the ASEAN to achieve more solidarity and centrality, promote more conferences with China and the US on anti-epidemic cooperation, ensure supply chains, facilitate trade activities toward global recovery. This cooperation offers both economic interest and dynamic balancing in the China–US–ASEAN triangle relations.

7.5 Conclusion

The increasing pressure of the geopolitical and geo-economic competition between the US and China in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic has provided an unprecedented opportunity for ASEAN states to reshape their relationship with China. On one hand, China is very likely to play a bigger role in international affairs, and it

that Chinese companies are inclined to employ their native labor force also creates dissatisfaction. In March 2020, it was reported that a clash broke out between the protesters and the security forces in Sulawesi, Indonesia, because 49 Chinese workers were sent to work at a nickel mine in the Southeast of this island. See Tan (2020).

27Marina (2020).

28ASEAN tái khẳng định quyết tâm xây dựng Biển Đông thành vùng biển phát triển và an toàn (2020).

29Tan (2020).
will be in a tremendously powerful position to shape the world”. On the other hand, China is not the only player who set the rule, the US and EU will come out against China’s efforts of changing the present order. Nonetheless, given the fact that the US and EU have been busy coping with the pandemic, China has hardly encountered any resistance from them.

Vietnam’s attitude toward China’s assertiveness during the pandemic demonstrates the country’s strategy of “cooperation and opposition” in major-power diplomacy. In practice, Vietnam has proactively cooperated with China on minimizing the adverse impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the eco-social development and promoting ASEAN-China cooperation due to its responsibility of the rotating President of ASEAN in 2020. However, such cooperation has few impacts on the geopolitical competition between China and Vietnam, especially the SCS disputes. There are three suggestions from the Vietnamese side, in which the first one is that Vietnam should continue to pursue a “cooperation and opposition” strategy with China. Secondly, it should try to resolve maritime disputes with the Philippines and Malaysia. Thirdly, it would be better off to establish a lobby group in ASEAN to promote international laws and make peaceful settlement of the disputes in the SCS. Lastly, great powers should be encouraged to maintain and enhance their continuous presence in the region and the continuing engagement between Vietnam and the great powers will contribute to the progress toward a law-binding order in the SCS. To conclude, Vietnam should prepare for the long-term game with China as short-term measures are less likely to yield positive results.

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