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FREE AND OPEN INDO – PACIFIC STRATEGY: IMPACTS ON VIETNAM

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ABSTRACT:

The paper identifies the challenges and opportunities of security, economy, governance methods, and external relations that the Trump administration's Indo-Pacific Free and Open Strategy brings to Vietnam through the analysis of implementation of this strategy published in official US government documents and research papers; through the synthesis and statistics of data related to Vietnam-US relations in the past 10 years; through a comparison of the pillars of the strategy to the national interests of Vietnam. The concept of the Indian Ocean-Pacific Ocean region is not new in the geopolitical strategy calculations of the powers for Asia. But this concept was only really noticeable in recent times when President Donald Trump spoke about America's vision of the Indian-Pacific strategy for the first time at the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Summit held in Da Nang, Vietnam in November 2017. Vietnam is particularly interested in how this strategy will be implemented to shape its security environment. From the identification of the challenges and opportunities that the strategy brings to Vietnam, we suggest a number of measures for Vietnam's leaders to make policies to improve the effectiveness of foreign affairs in a new context.

INTRODUCTION:

The term "Indo-Pacific" first introduced by Indian strategist Gurreet S. Khurana in an essay in 2007 has been gradually used by some powers such as Japan, India, Australia and The United States to describe the new geopolitical structure of Asia (Le, 2018). However, it is only when this concept was adopted by the Trump Administration that it has really become famous and attracted worldwide attention. In the National Security Strategy published on December 18, 2017, the Trump administration affirmed that "the Indo-Pacific is important to America's stability, security, and prosperity." At the 2018 Shangri La Dialogue in Singapore, US Defense Secretary James Mattis called America's Indo-Pacific strategy "a subset of our broader security strategy, codifying our principles as America continues to look West". Thus, the Indo-Pacific was quickly transformed from a concept to a new US strategy for Asia.

When discussing this strategy, analysts and scholars largely believe that the "Indo-Pacific" strategy has four main goals: i) Avoid creating a feeling of head-on confrontation with China; ii) Revive the US-Japan-India-Australia strategic alliance; iii) Emphasize the role of the US and India in the region; iv) Delivering the message that freedom of navigation is a pillar for regional security (Pham, 2018). Most of them said the Trump administration's new policy was to strengthen cooperation with India to counterbalance China.

With the "America first" view, this strategy of The Trump administration is not only to serve the interests of the United States but also to expand it globally. Due to the importance and the wide range of impacts of the US strategic adjustment, many governments publish official documents expressing views on this issue such as Japan, Australia, France, India ... Many studies have analyzed the term Indo-Pacific (Khurana, 2007), the inheritance of strategy through the presidential generations of the United States (Dinh, 2017), the main pillars of the strategy (Le, 2018 ; Yong, 2018), how to implement the strategy (Lee, 2018; Pham, 2018), the initial reaction of close allies of the United States and other countries and organizations around the world on the strategy (Fang , 2017; Chen, 2018; Hoang, 2019; Wilson, 2019). However, no studies clarify how this strategy affects Vietnam. Which foreign policy is suitable for Vietnam in the context of US strategy implementation?

To answer this question, the paper analyzes how the strategy is implemented, compares the main pillars of the strategy with Vietnam's national and people's interests, and statistics on Vietnam-US relations in the past 10 years and synthesizes statements of leaders of the two countries on strategy.

The paper is structured as follows: Firstly, we briefly present an overview of the Open and Free Indo-Pacific Strategy. We then examine the impact of the strategy on Vietnam through a qualitative approach with statistics that are specific to each sector. Finally, we recommend foreign policy to Vietnam in the context of US strategic implementation.

OVERVIEW OF THE US FREE AND OPEN INDO-PACIFIC STRATEGY:

In November 2017, during the speech at APEC 2017 Economic Leaders' Week in Vietnam, US President Donald Trump first publicly mentioned a free and open Indo-Pacific region and argued that " free and open Indo-Pacific - a place where sovereign and independent nations, with diverse cultures and many different dreams, can all prosper side-by-side, and thrive

in freedom and peace”¹. A month later, the phrase continued to appear in the National Security Strategy (NSS) of the United States, with the top position among areas important to Washington's interests. The Trump administration also upholds the role of "leading", "strong defense and strategic partners" in the region of New Delhi, and the US-Japan-Australia-India cooperate more strongly (Lee, 2018). So what actually is this "Indo-Pacific" strategy?

The Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy (FOIP) has inherited many of the previous American presidential strategies as well as the strategic ideas of US allies and partners.

The Indian Ocean was first mentioned by the administration of President George.W. Bush in the U.S. National Security Strategy in 2002 (Dinh, 2017). The G. Bush Administration asserted that the United States and India had a common interest in free trade lanes in the ocean in the Indian and Pacific oceans. The administration of former President Barack Obama has been very active in involving India into a strategy to turn to the Asia-Pacific region. Former U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton emphasized the policy for Japan, India, and Australia to join the rebalancing strategy in the expanding Indo-Pacific region².

Japan also had the idea of the Indo-Pacific region. During a visit to India in 2007, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe mentioned "the axis of freedom and prosperity along the Eurasian space", as well as "the dynamic combination between the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean" and promote cooperation between the U.S., Japan, Australia and India in a democratic "diamond quadrilateral". In April 2017, Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs released its "Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy" (MoFA Strategy) which describes how Tokyo will broaden its worldview and strategic role under the Shinzo Abe era defined by the desire to make a "proactive contribution to peace" (Lee, 2018). A key for stability and prosperity of the international community is dynamism that is created by combining "Two Continents": Asia that is rapidly growing and Africa that possess huge potential of growth; and "Two Oceans": Free and open Pacific Ocean and Indian Ocean³.

In 2013, Australia also mentioned the concept of Indo-Pacific in its Defense White Paper. In this document, Australia confirmed the importance of transport routes, energy flows and strategic values between the Indian and Pacific oceans, with Southeast Asia as the focus. In Australia's White Paper on Foreign Policy published in November 2017, the Indo-Pacific was reminded 74 times, while Asia-Pacific is only mentioned 4 times⁴.

The Trump administration has revealed the essentials of the goals, geographical scope, connotation and ways of implementing FOIP. In terms of goals, FOIP aims to control China's growth and protect America's position in regional order, generalized to serve the U.S.-China geo-strategic objectives.

In terms of geography, FOIP is based on the "connection" between the Indian and Pacific Oceans, identifying a large area of over 80 million square kilometers including the Indian Ocean

¹The White House.(2017).Remarks by President Trump at APEC CEO Summit, Da Nang, Viet Nam.Retrieved from <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-apec-ceo-summit-da-nang-vietnam/>

²Former Minister of Foreign Affairs Hillary Clinton, "America's Pacific Century", Foreign Policy Magazine, October 11, 2011.

³ Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy, <https://www.asean.emb-japan.go.jp/files/000352880.pdf>

⁴Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade.(2017). 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper.Retrieved from <https://dfat.gov.au/about-us/publications/Pages/2017-foreign-policy-white-paper.aspx>

region to the east of the African coast and the Pacific Ocean to the West Coast of the United States.

In terms of connotation, FOIP is based on two values of "free" and "open". Accordingly, "free" is expressed on two levels: at the international level, countries are not forced nor imposed; and at the national level, individuals are not suppressed but enjoy good governance. "Open" in FOIP means that maritime routes are not controlled or prevented by any power and the free and equal trade system is maintained(Le, 2018).

In terms of implementation, at the June 2016 Shangri-La Dialogue, U.S. Secretary of Defense James Mattis pointed out four main directions of U.S. action in FOIP implementation⁵.

First, the U.S. will expand attention on the maritime space, maintain the common maritime space by helping their allies and partners build up naval and law enforcement capabilities and capacities to improve monitoring and protection of maritime interests and orders.

Second, the U.S. will focus on strengthening joint military operational capacity between the military forces through funding and selling advanced defense equipment to regional security partners, intensifying professional military training and regular contacts for military officers of the armies between countries in the Indo-Pacific region.

Third, the U.S. will strengthen the obedience of the law, promote the rule of law, civil society, and transparent governance. Accordingly, the U.S. will continue to deeply participate in existing regional mechanisms, including the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting (ADMM +), and the East Asia Summit (EAS) and APEC, along with three-party and multi-party mechanisms with other partners.

Fourth, in economic terms, the U.S. will promote the private sector-led economic development; lead and focus on commercial and investment activities, including in infrastructure. Besides, the U.S. will also strengthen financial institutions to keep common "rules of the game". Mr. J.Mattis emphasized: "The U.S. does not make empty promises and does not force partner countries to surrender economic sovereignty." According to observers, these are steps to directly compete with China's "Belt, Road" initiative (BRI), to emphasize the introduction of "alternatives" to projects in BRI's infrastructure and economic connection, and not to allow China's "rules of the game" to prevail in the region(Fang, 2017). FOIP basically inherits the fundamental elements of the pivoting/rebalancing strategy. However, the trend of restraining China's influence seems to be stronger under President Trump and Trump's drastic leadership style has pushed the U.S.-China competition to a new level. Along with officially expanding the geographical scope including the Indian Ocean in its policy toward Asia, the new U.S. government has emphasized the strategic competitiveness in the relationship with China. Accordingly, the U.S. adopted a tougher approach to China, focusing on defense - security and economy - trade.

Thus, FOIP of the United States has shown consistency in U.S. foreign strategy, the bipartisan consensus within the U.S. and that with allies and partners; consistency in recognizing America's national interests in the Indo-Pacific region.

⁵James Mattis. (2018). Remarks by Secretary Mattis at Plenary Session of the 2018 Shangri-La Dialogue.Retrieved from <https://dod.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript-View/Article/1538599/remarks-by-secretary-mattis-at-plenary-session-of-the-2018-shangri-la-dialogue/>

IMPACTS ON VIETNAM:

If China brings the BRI initiative worth hundreds of billions of dollars to transport infrastructure without mentioning much of "regional security", then U.S. FOIP provides three main pillars (security, economy, governance), in addition to calculating and competing strategically with powerful countries, all plans bring peace and stability to the region, promising many attractions for countries in the region in general and Vietnam in particular. As can be seen clearly, in this strategy, Vietnam has a great interest in most issues on all three pillars. The viewpoint and stance of Vietnam have many similarities with the connotations of all three pillars mentioned above.

First of all, in terms of security, Vietnam's constant goal is to ensure national sovereignty and security as well as territorial integrity in every historical period and especially during the reform era. As a party to the East Sea (South China Sea) dispute and threatened by China's growing power and increasing assertiveness, Vietnam will benefit from a rule-based regional order and non-existent coercion. Similarly, freedom of navigation and aviation is also what Vietnam seeks to promote as a flag to gather forces to mobilize international support for its struggle against China in the South China Sea.

With the basic policy of "Free" and "Open" expressed in the connotation of the strategy, the U.S. calls for open investment and freedom of navigation and trade while enhancing naval presence to show signs referring to the illegal behavior of other powers in the South China Sea more clearly. In 2020, the U.S. is expected to bring two-thirds of its naval forces in other regions to Asia-Pacific. The US military had planned to deploy 60 percent of its naval and air forces, and 60 percent of its Pacific fleet in the Asia-Pacific region by 2020 (Fang, 2017). The U.S. has had a long military presence here, but the other point of this strategy is that the U.S. will invest more in defense and presence in the region, serving humanitarian relief activities, disaster risk reduction, and peacekeeping, in which Vietnam and the Philippines are the two countries that receive the most investment from this source.

Next, Vietnam is economically a country heavily dependent on trade and foreign investment and is seeking to upgrade its infrastructure system, so the economic attributes of the FOIP strategy such as open infrastructure, open investment, and open trade are also in line with Vietnam's policy.

In the framework of the visit to Vietnam on April 3, 2019, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Walter Douglas gave a presentation on FOIP. Economically, Mr. Douglas pointed out three areas in which the United States will focus its investment in the Indo-Pacific region in the future: infrastructure, digital economy, and energy. These are the three areas in which Vietnam is seeking investment resources, including several important goals such as the North-South highway; addressing energy shortages in the next few years and how to approach the fourth industrial revolution. These are very big goals, domestic private resources cannot be taken care of, so FDI investment from the U.S. strategy is the best solution.

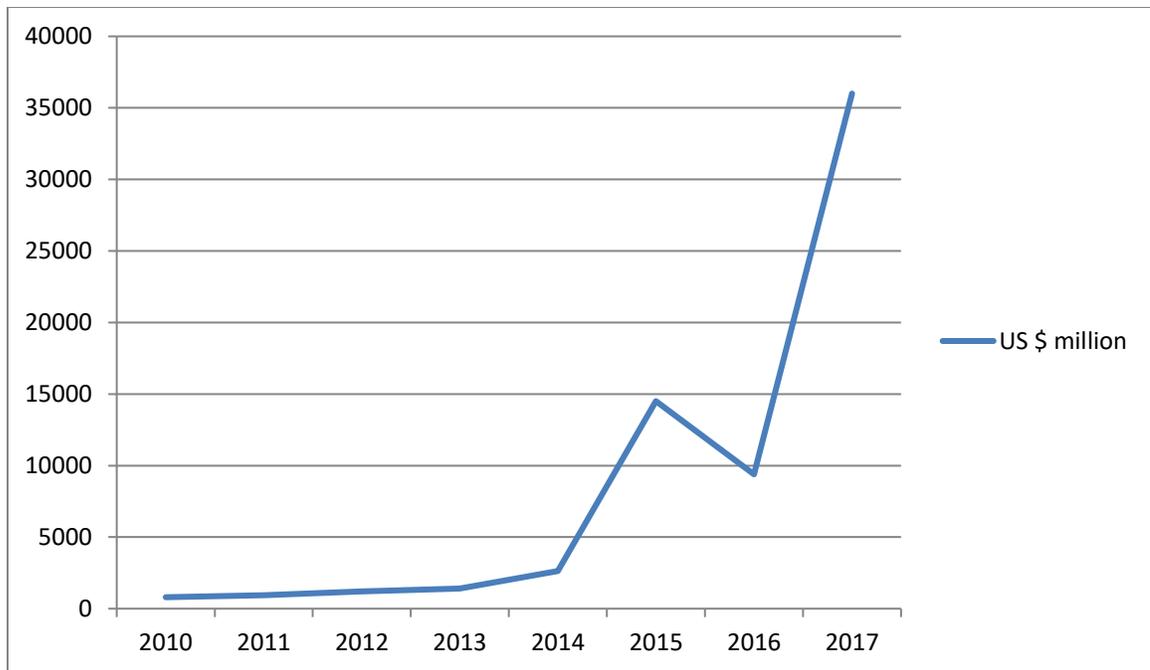


Figure 1: FDI from US to Vietnam over the years (Source: General statistics office of Vietnam)

The U.S. goal is that in the future, FDI from this country to Vietnam must be at least as high as the Philippines, and other countries must also be higher so that all regional countries receive U.S. FDI in an increasing direction.

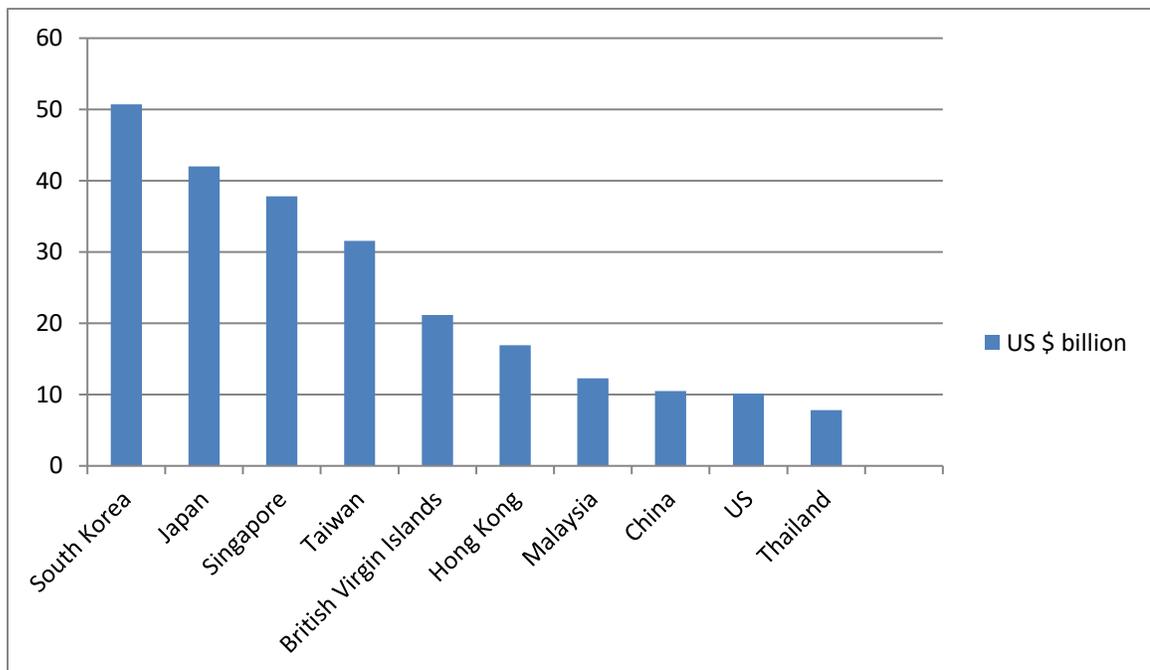


Figure 2: Top 10 countries and territories with highest FDI into Vietnam as of end 2016 (Source: General statistics office of Vietnam)

The economic infrastructure aspect of this strategy can reshape the capital market for the region, helping Vietnam to have more choices, and at the same time, "negotiating tools" to ensure benefits between the parties.

In addition, the U.S. promises to bring more transparent management methods. For example, if one needs high-quality infrastructure, the bidding must be open and transparent. Of course, this is a concern that Vietnam needs to change. The U.S. government wants to create a more attractive environment for U.S. investors because American companies want to invest in Vietnam but they need consistent policy and favorable investment environment to invest in and to withdraw money. According to the Transparency International's rankings based on the opinion of experts and businessmen on corruption in public sector, the increase in two consecutive years (2016-2017) justifies the government's commitment to anti-corruption and transparent governance.

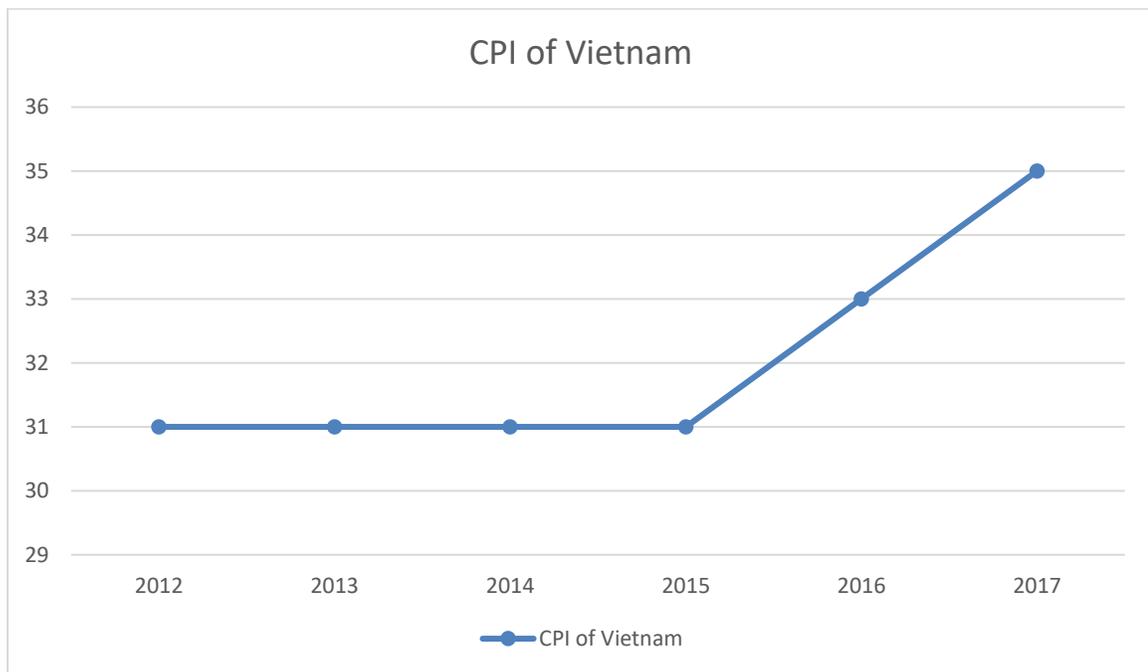


Figure 3: CPI of Vietnam over the years (Source: Transparency International)

However, the downside of U.S. FOIP needs to be precautionary, it basically causes contradictions of interests between great powers, engenders possible strong conflicts affecting the environment of peace and security in the region, and poses many challenges to Vietnam. Some countries outside the region, though claiming to have no stance over the South China Sea dispute, seek a dominant role by integrating Japan's Go South policy and India's Act East policy. Therefore, the strategy will complicate the South China Sea issue.

SUGGESTIONS OF FOREIGN POLICY TO VIETNAM:

The dominant trend in the region and the world is globalization and international integration, so the foreign policymaking process of each country must take into account external factors. In the context of U.S. new strategy which creates many opportunities and challenges, Vietnam must choose for itself suitable and flexible response plans; At the same time, it should not depend too much on external forces, which means to have adequate reciprocal resources to hopefully take advantage of opportunities effectively.

Firstly, promoting cooperation with powerful countries is often accompanied by gathering forces. Competition among major countries in the region is increasing rapidly, Vietnam needs to be conscious to avoid having to choose one side or the other. Good handling and balancing relations between major countries is the most important key to promoting cooperation, taking advantage of the great opportunities brought about by this strategy.

Due to the South China Sea dispute and vulnerability to a rising China, Vietnam has the benefit of cooperating with the United States and other security partners to maintain regional order based on rules as well as to promote a regional security architecture that is not dominated by any power. Therefore, Vietnam may support FOIP, although it is not necessarily done publicly. Diplomatically, Vietnam can work with partners of the same perception to add the main elements of FOIP into bilateral or multilateral joint statements. In terms of practical operations, Vietnam is likely to continue to strengthen strategic cooperation with the major powers, especially members of the Japan-U.S.-India-Australia quartet in order to enhance cooperation security in the region and improve its negotiating position before China.

However, like most other ASEAN members, due to extensive economic relations with China, Vietnam may not participate in a rigid anti-China bloc or adopt a public confrontational approach in managing China's rise. The Indo-Pacific strategy is likely to drive up security risks in China's maritime strategic channels and trade routes. About 90 percent of its foreign trade is through sea transportation and 75 percent of imported oil is shipped to the South China Sea via the Indian Ocean and the Strait of Malacca. In the long run, the Indian Ocean and the Strait of Malacca will still be an important maritime lifeline for China. Currently, the US has seven base clusters in the Indian Ocean and the Asia-Pacific region, accounting for nearly 50 percent of its 587 sites overseas. Once the Indo-Pacific strategy is implemented, Washington and New Delhi will lift the status and role of military bases and facilities in the Indian Ocean and consequently add security risks to China in the waters (Fang, 2017). In this context, Vietnam can prioritize the current network of security relations with major powers and partners with the same strategic perception as long as China does not adopt an overly coercive approach to the South China Sea dispute, which may force Vietnam to move to a more assertive and confrontational strategic posture.

Secondly, the objectives and principles of this strategy are quite clear, but the content, implementation methods and specific steps of each partner are still unclear. Therefore, this strategy needs to be monitored further.

Although Vietnam and other regional countries may play a certain role in operating FOIP, whether or not the strategy is successful will be determined by the United States. Accordingly, Washington needs to demonstrate a consistent strategic vision for the region based on strong leadership and reliable long-term commitments. The United States also needs to clarify how Washington expects countries in the region to play a role in the strategy, and to provide a detailed action plan to guide the involvement of interested countries if desired. More importantly, this process should be conducted based on the consultations of the United States and its allies and partners. Any attempt by Washington to impose its will on regional countries, even in the name of an open and free rule-based regional order, may also be counterproductive.

Thirdly, there are still many differences between the four key countries (the U.S., Japan, Australia, and India), in the Indo-Pacific strategy. Therefore, the relationship between these countries needs to be skillfully handled.

CONCLUSION:

The Indo-Pacific strategy is essentially a strategic adjustment in U.S. relations with China. The content of this strategy has a number of advantages for regional peace and stability, due to its aim to stabilize and develop the regional economy, promote international law, and emphasize the open and free regional mechanism, especially the central role of ASEAN. However, this is the product of strategic interaction between the major countries, especially between the U.S. and China, whereby the whirlwind of action and reaction, dominated by a lack of trust between the two sides, has made the world situation more volatile, the instability increased, and therefore it sets out for the countries concerned many immediate problems which must be addressed.

In this strategy, ASEAN and Vietnam are placed in a high position and the centre for gathering forces of all parties. However, the responses and attitudes of the countries involved in and outside the region are still quite conservative and cautious since all parties have not yet evaluated the impact and consequences of this strategy. Accordingly, Vietnam needs to take prudent steps, and step by step build its own stance, viewpoint and closely monitor the regional situation in order to make timely policy adjustments. /.

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