

# An Approach to Vietnam Geopolitical Vulnerability and Policy Implications

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**Abstract:** The current global geopolitical and geo-economic structure is undergoing dramatic changes, which have a profound impact on the complexity of Vietnam's geo-environment and its geographical vulnerability. Systematic study of Vietnam's national geographical vulnerability has important theoretical and practical significance for China's "Belt and Road" construction and surrounding geopolitical policies. Based on the geopolitics and human-land aerial systems and other theories and methods, this study determines the scopes of national geopolitical vulnerability scheme from the aspects of exposure, sensitivity and adaptability, with combination of normative analysis and empirical analysis, and analyzes national geographical vulnerability characteristics of Vietnam. It is of geopolitical significance implication for diplomatic policies.

## 1 Introduction

The term vulnerability is derived from the field of epidemiology and refers to the meaning of wound, and has been widely used in the study of physical geography and ecological environment [1]. With the global changes and the resource and environmental pressures brought about by the economy growth, vulnerability and its assessment have received more and more attention. Within the scheme of International Biological Program (IBP), the Man and Biosphere Program (MAB), as well as the Geosphere, Biosphere Program (IGBP) and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), vulnerability is increasingly regarded as an important research area [2, 3]. In the 21st century, vulnerability research has tended to a multidisciplinary and comprehensive analysis of natural systems and socio-economic systems, widely used in many fields such as climate change, disaster management, public health, land use, and human system sustainability [1-3]. The vulnerability of the human-land system covers economic, social, environmental, political and other dimensions [4]. There is still no clear definition of the vulnerability of the human-land system, but researchers generally agree that the IPCC's definition of vulnerability refers to the degree of damage to a vulnerable system. Exposure, sensitivity and adaptive capacity or resilience are the three components of systemic vulnerability [5]. Vulnerability-related researches are increasingly moving into a more targeted and integrated direction. Vulnerability research also has important theoretical and practical significance in the analysis of geopolitical pattern. Vulnerability is the result of the joint interaction of economy, politics, culture, resources, environment and other geopolitical factors. It is of a comprehensive state in which a nation adaptability and the sensitivity to various internal and external challenges are limited by national strength and ability, accompanied with preventing and resisting various risk factors and their various impact factors.

## 2 Methodology and Scheme

Here, the study firstly summarized and put forward the concept of national geopolitical vulnerability, which is within a geopolitical research category, involving various factors, including physical geography, resource and environmental endowments, economic development level, social and cultural heritage, strategic military strength, internal regional structure, social class relationship, and international geopolitical environment. The systematic and structural impacts of geostrategic elements, related to the territorial integrity, core values, internal solidarity, and external relations of one country, are affected by influences and threats from geopolitical risks, and are sensitive to the power stresses in the face of geopolitical risks. National strategic response capacity is a comprehensive reflection of the functional structure of its succession stage, and the result of the interaction of pressure, self-sensitivity and adaptability of the geopolitical state (as Figure 1). The internal factors of a country's geo-fracture mainly include the country's geographical status, historical culture, economic level, social structure, and others. External vulnerabilities are mainly reflected in the comprehensive national strength and geo-strategy of neighboring countries, the level and structure of foreign trade, and the international political and economic order and the worldwide major power relations.

Geopolitical risk mainly stems from exposure, which is the threat to the country and its internal succession mechanisms. In the face of external pressure, the geopolitical elasticity of a country depends on its sensitivity to risks or threats. Sensitivity measures the extent to which geo-environmental changes affect the national state, that is, the collective control of individual behaviors in terms of dependence and its comprehensive cost [6]. The approach to adaptability and risk aversion in the face of geopolitical risk mechanisms is determined by the strategic response capacity that the state has, that is, the ability to pay for changes in the policy system to effectively adapt to changes in the geopolitical environment. The interaction between risk, sensitivity and adaptability determines the country's geographical vulnerability, while the evolution of the international order and global governance structure is the driving force for the evolution of the country's geo-fracture. National geo-vulnerability is an important mechanism for inter-state dependence and a key factor in determining what geopolitical strategies and actions the country adopts. Geo-fracture is constantly changing, with different functional characteristics and scale connections in different historical stages. There is a time and space interaction between the geopolitical state and the surrounding sub-regions, with other countries of larger scale or within the same scale, related with the global geostrategic situation and the international order and the past geo-vulnerability and future development trends. Geopolitical pressure may affect its sensitivity and strategic response. When the risk exposure is overlarge, the sensitivity and vulnerability reach a certain level, or the response capacity is problematic, the country will undergo major changes, and its geo-environmental pattern will move to another cycle or enter another steady state.

The “anti-vulnerability” mechanism [7, 8] still exists. Many variables influence the evolution of the characteristics and extension of the country's geopolitical characteristics. The new international mechanism provides the possibility and relatively favorable external conditions, especially towards the increasingly “composite interdependence” [6]. In the era of globalization, scale constraints have gradually weakened in some respects [6-8]. In the process of various vulnerabilities, the performance of small countries is also very different [7], but this performance has certain limits, mostly targeting the degree and nature of economic vulnerability, and international politics realism and new systems. Some ideologies believe that military and security dependencies still dominate other attributes [9], and that national security and strategic vulnerability and external dependence are inherent features.

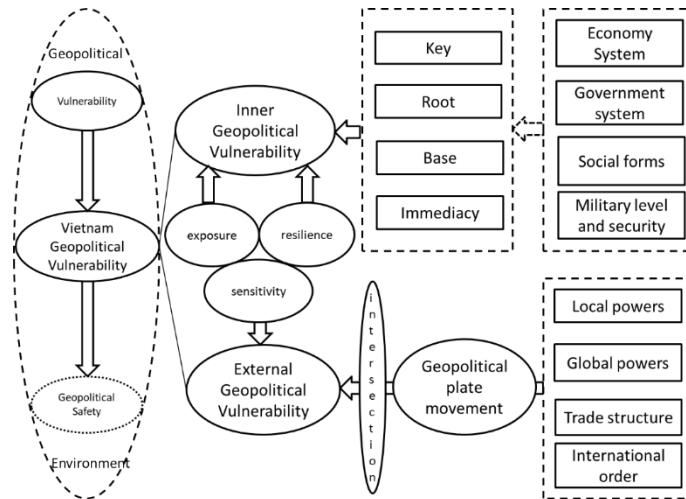


Fig 1. Vietnam Geopolitical Vulnerability Scheme

### 3 Geopolitical Vulnerability Analysis

#### 3.1 Geopolitical risk analysis

Geo-risk (stress) stems from exposure, that is, the country faces external geo-environmental threats. The evolution of the international order and the global governance system is the driving force for the evolution of the national geopolitical fracture. The risk analysis of national geographic vulnerability, namely external vulnerability is firstly explored. Since the beginning of the 21st century, the international political, economic, and cultural pattern has been undergoing dramatic changes and restructuring. The unipolar pattern dominated is declining, the emerging countries such as China are rising rapidly, the traditional developed countries in are reviving, and the international order is developing in a multi-polar direction. The geopolitical game between countries or groups of countries has undergone dramatic changes, and geographical relations have been being differentiated and integrated. The location characteristics of the marginal zone of Vietnam, the strategic fulcrum of the Greater Mekong Sub-region and the South Asian subcontinent geopolitical plate, and the intensification of geopolitical competition among the extra-regional powers have profoundly affected the complexity of the geopolitical environment around Vietnam and its geographical vulnerability. At present, the geopolitical pattern of the Indo-China Peninsula and the South Asian subcontinent has undergone major changes. Large powers have joined the geopolitical competition in this sub-region, which has once again been the trend of fragmentation and concealment, and also profoundly affects geopolitical uncertainty and vulnerability.

The three major geopolitical plates of the world currently include the Atlantic and Pacific trade-dependent ocean plate, the Eurasian heart plate of Russia, the mixed continent and ocean plate of the East Asia, and the geomorphic plate of the mixed continent and ocean of the Indian South Asian subcontinent district [10]. The contradiction between the marine geopolitical system and the continental geopolitical system within the encirclement and anti-surrounding is historical and strategic. The marginal intersection is the main geopolitical buffer zone and strategic competition zone. The estuary and route competition is geopolitical. On the essence of geopolitics, Vietnam is in the middle of the four major geopolitical areas, and it is the most intense ground for the competition of major geopolitical forces. Resources competition, territorial disputes, channel competition, cultural conflicts and other issues have made the fragile edge become one of the most frequent political conflicts in the world. Vietnam is within India eastward strategy, China two-ocean strategy,

Russia containment strategy, Western blocking strategy and Japan geopolitical focus area, increasing the possibility of geopolitical and economic interests disputes, facing huge geopolitics pressures.

### **3.2 Internal Factors Analysis**

The national geopolitical fracture is mainly due to geopolitical risks and pressures, but the key lies in the geopolitical internal vulnerability factors and its succession mechanism. The sensitivity of the state to geopolitical threats and the ability to adapt to risk mitigation in the face of external geopolitical pressure determine the country's geographical vulnerability. Here, the internal geopolitical factors of Vietnam, such as national physical geography, resource and environmental endowments, economic development level, social and cultural heritage, strategic military strength, internal regional structure, and social class relationship are first studied, that is, internal vulnerability analysis.

Traditional geopolitical theory holds that the important advantage of “small country” is that national policies can be implemented in a timely manner, public services are easier, and state management is more efficient and convenient [7]. However, Vietnam does not belong to this state. Its territory is relatively narrow, its strategic depth is insufficient, and it is affected by the strong geopolitical influence of many neighboring countries. The state's ability to govern nation is weak, and its ability to withstand the crisis is weak. The main part of the country has a strip shape, and the terrain is long and narrow, and the whole shows I-shaped. The narrow shape of the territory has increased the difficulty of national strategic security deployment, and the fragile narrow part has become a strategically weak area. Due to the lack of land shape and infrastructure, the inconvenient transportation links between regions have brought many disadvantages to domestic inter-regional exchanges and state management. The geopolitical penetration is stronger, adding to the difficulty and complexity of national management and national defense security strategies. Due to historical and colonial factors, there are different levels of territorial disputes with neighboring countries. Vietnam is affected by geographical relations in the management of water use, flood control and disaster mitigation, public security management.

One of the most critical elements of geo-fracture is the political stability of the country. In the traditional international political sense, the “small country” has less internal coordination difficulty and conflict of interest in domestic politics, and it is easier to operate political mechanisms such as democracy and the rule of law [6, 7]. The anti-vulnerability view also believes that political mechanisms such as democracy and the rule of law are the core structures of political anti-fragility [8]. However, small actors often lack the ability to maintain political and political processes, which is also an extension of the aforementioned fragility of state governance capacity, the so-called “sudden and dramatic collapse” [7, 8]. The cost of rent-seeking is high, which exacerbates its vulnerability characteristics. In addition, Vietnam policy and regulation system lacks continuity and transparency, with inefficiency. And, the size of the country affects the size of a country's economy, which in turn affects the country's production efficiency and economic structure, leading to strong external dependence. Due to natural endowments, market size and other reasons, small actors often need a high degree of openness. However, due to the long-term sanctions imposed by Western countries, and the closure and vulnerability of their economic structure, the Vietnamese economy can be said to be economically risky and fragile, which in turn leads to a congenital deficiency in national governance capacity. This national economic system, which relies on the export of agricultural products and natural resources, is vulnerable to the impact and influence of the natural environment, the international market, and the geopolitical blockade. In addition, Vietnam lacks a

complete economic system and financial system, the ability to resist external financial crisis is weak. It is easy to produce a collateral effect, which directly leads to a devastating blow to the national economy.

Although Vietnam has a land area of only over 320,000 square kilometers, there is no social resource allocation and social cohesion advantage in the traditional political sense of small actors [6-8]. Unbalanced regional distribution, weak social cohesion, and complex ethnic cultural conflicts exacerbate the characteristics of vulnerability and instability. Complex ethnic conditions, coupled with the complex subtropical rainforest mountains, which have long been affected by rain erosion and river cutting, mountainous valleys and fault basins, the situation will be more complicated. This might become a geostrategic tool for neighboring countries or large countries outside the region, generating the centrifugal force of the country and increasing geographical vulnerability. In addition, the geographical environment has caused large regional differences in economic development, urbanization and culture to a certain extent. Inter-regional differences and instabilities also exacerbates complex ethnic conflicts and national instability. Small actors have made them more vulnerable to international anarchy in terms of population, territory, defense budget, and strategic security, and become “fragile animals” [11]. This makes it more vulnerable to external pressures and more susceptible to the interrelated effects of domestic and foreign affairs [7, 8-11], making it a military alliance or relying on the security of a large power as a security strategy choice, with consequent possible security problems. This is evident in Vietnam. Although military development has been highly valued under the government for a long time, military equipment and technology are relatively backward due to economic backwardness. Armaments are mainly from neighboring countries such as China, Russia, India, as well as Ukraine, Serbia, Indonesia, Israel.

#### **4 Conclusion**

The study indicated that Vietnam has typical national geopolitical fracture characteristics in terms of exposure, sensitivity and adaptability characteristics. The history and reality of international political and economic development have also shown that a nation's efficient institutions and modes of operation could only overcome the economic fragility caused by the endowment of geographical resources, but the nation's geopolitical vulnerability and its consequent dependence are essential acts. The basic attribute characteristics inherent in the body, and the dependence makes it a basic choice in the economic, especially security, relying on the alliance of a large power or its organization to form a regional power balance system. The high degree of foreign dependence makes it subject to the external environment. The national natural geography, resource and environmental endowments, economic and political systems, social and cultural heritage, and internal regional structure all determine the fragile nature of Vietnam geopolitical system, while the geographical relationship and decision-making between Vietnam and China fundamentally affect national international geopolitics, especially geopolitical position in the region and world. First of all, China is Vietnam's largest investment and trading partner, with huge economic impacts. Vietnam has natural links with ethnic minorities in southwest China. Then, China and Vietnam have always been good-neighborly, friendly, and win-win relation in recent decades. The important links in the realization of the late-comer advantages are to link with the growth of the large economies, to achieve regional learning and innovation mechanisms. It is the first step and key for Vietnam's economic take-off to strengthen cooperation with China. And, China and Vietnam have strong interdependence [6, 7]. How to maintain the direction of China-Vietnam relations, is of geopolitical significance to China western development, surrounding geopolitical environment and overall diplomatic policies.

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