



Geopolitical Intelligence
Services Dossier

Vietnam

The art of independence and growth
amid big power rivalry



Dossier



Vietnam is a textbook example of how a middle-sized power can learn to survive on one of the world's most dangerous geopolitical fault lines.

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Introduction

The Socialist Republic of Viet Nam (Vietnam) is perched on the eastern edge of the Indo-Chinese Peninsula, stretching along the coast of the South China Sea. It is a narrow coastal country, like Norway or Chile, extending more than 2,000 kilometers from north to south, with a population of nearly 100 million people. Historically, Vietnam's geography has been a source of insecurity.

Fiercely defending its independence throughout its eventful history – only in the second half of the 20th century did Vietnam chase out three powerful invaders: Imperial France, the United States and China's People's Liberation Army – these days, it aims to steer clear of the U.S.-China rivalry while forging its own development path.

The big power competition has made the Southeast Asian nation into a geopolitical fulcrum, with China's looming presence to the north, historical ties with Russia and, recently, the courting by the U.S. as part of Washington's Indo-Pacific strategy. Hanoi's responses and policies will draw on a narrow view of the country's national interests, an imperative for autonomy and the political interests of the Communist Party of Vietnam.

To hold its own in these circumstances, Vietnam needs a strong and growing economy. Consequently, it encourages new businesses and foreign investors. It has built a military deterrent while carefully seeking to balance one superpower against the other, so that neither can take control. While Vietnam's geographic vulnerability remains, this system of deterrence, nonalignment and a sound economy may secure its position in a region where titans could meet in devastating confrontation.

