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# Developmental Hedging through Technology Diplomacy: Vietnam's Engagement with the United States and China under Đổi Mới 2.0

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**Abstract**

As U.S.-China competition increasingly shapes the global technological landscape, access to critical technologies has become a central challenge for states seeking development while preserving strategic autonomy. This article examines how Vietnam responds to this challenge through technology diplomacy under Đổi Mới 2.0. It argues that Vietnam practices a form of developmental hedging through functional technology diplomacy, whereby the United States and Chinese technological ecosystems are engaged for different developmental purposes. The findings show that cooperation with the U.S. focuses more on frontier technologies, innovation networks, and talent development, while cooperation with China emphasizes infrastructure, industrial capabilities, and connectivity. Vietnam adapts its technology diplomacy to the characteristics of each ecosystem in order to expand technological access, strengthen domestic capabilities, and reinforce strategic autonomy. The article contributes to the literature by developing the concept of developmental hedging, showing that hedging can operate not only as a security strategy but also as a development strategy for technological upgrading and national transformation. More broadly, the findings suggest that middle-power technology diplomacy can help sustain cooperation across competing ecosystems, reduce pressures for exclusive alignment, and contribute to a more stable international technological order.

**Keywords:** Developmental hedging, Technology diplomacy, Đổi Mới 2.0, Vietnam foreign policy, U.S.-China technological competition

## Introduction

Technology has become a central arena of contemporary international politics. Technological advances associated with the Fourth Industrial Revolution, particularly artificial intelligence (AI), are reshaping production systems, economic competitiveness, and developmental trajectories worldwide. Meanwhile, intensifying U.S.-China competition is increasingly structured around competing technological ecosystems (Duan et al., 2024). The growing use of geoeconomic and technological governance instruments has contributed to technological fragmentation, complicated international cooperation, and transformed technological interdependence into a potential source of geopolitical leverage and strategic vulnerability.

For states positioned between competing technological ecosystems, the challenge is no longer just how to integrate into the global economy, but how to maintain access to critical technologies and preserve strategic interdependence amid an increasingly fragmented international landscape (Lim & Roberts, 2026). This dilemma is particularly relevant to Vietnam. Since late 2024, Vietnamese leaders have increasingly framed science, technology, innovation, and digital transformation as the foundation of national development through a series of major policy initiatives and strategic discourses. These shifts laid the groundwork for a new development phase commonly described as Đổi Mới (Renovation) 2.0 (Ha et al., 2020), whose core priorities were further consolidated at the

14th National Congress in January 2026. Unlike the earlier period of Đổi Mới (1986-2025), which focused on international integration and export-led growth, this new phase places greater emphasis on technological upgrading, industrial transformation, institutional reform, and national resilience (Ha & Tien, 2025). At the same time, Vietnam must pursue these objectives within an external environment shaped by U.S.-China technological rivalry.

Two main bodies of existing literature help explain how Vietnam pursues development and autonomy in Đổi Mới 2.0 while navigating that competition. The first group comprises studies of technology diplomacy, which focus primarily on technologically advanced countries, examining how they use diplomacy to shape global technology governance and standards, secure supply chains and compete for influence. The second group examines Vietnam's foreign policy responses to major power competition, particularly through hedging strategy, with a focus on managing security risks and preserving autonomy.

However, two research gaps remain. First, the literature on conventional hedging primarily explains how states manage risks and preserve autonomy amid major power competition, but less clearly captures how such competition can be leveraged for development purposes. This article therefore conceptualizes developmental hedging as a development-oriented extension of hedging strategy that combines risk management with the acquisition of external resources for domestic upgrading. Second, scholarship on technology diplomacy pays less attention to how middle powers, including Vietnam, navigate competing technological ecosystems. This article introduces the concept of functional technology diplomacy to explain the way Vietnam selectively engages different technological powers according to their strengths and developmental functions. Together, these two concepts respectively explain why and how Vietnam engages competing technological powers for its own development.

This article addresses the following research question: How is Vietnam using technology diplomacy under Đổi Mới 2.0 to respond to intensifying U.S.-China technological competition while preserving strategic autonomy and supporting domestic transformation?

The article argues that Vietnam practices a form of developmental hedging through functional technology diplomacy. Unlike conventional hedging, which primarily seeks to manage security risks arising from major-power competition, developmental hedging aims to leverage such competition for technological upgrading and industrial transformation while preserving strategic autonomy. Instead of committing to a single technological camp, Vietnam engages different technological ecosystems according to their respective strengths. The United States is approached primarily as a source of frontier technologies, innovation networks and human-capital development, while China is engaged as a source of infrastructure technologies, industrial capabilities, connectivity solutions, and implementation experience. Through this engagement strategy, technology diplomacy becomes an instrument for Vietnam to gain more resources while avoiding reliance on a single partner.

To explain Vietnam's technology diplomacy processes with the U.S. and China, the article develops an analytical framework that integrates developmental state theory, developmental hedging strategy, and functional technology diplomacy. It argues that Vietnam's developmental motivation, which rests on national interests and strategic autonomy, is filtered through developmental hedging and operationalized through functional technology diplomacy. The analysis then focuses on three dimensions of functional technology diplomacy: diplomatic engagement, technological agenda, and actor participation, which together shape Vietnam's access to critical technologies from both major powers. If successful, technology diplomacy can translate these access into domestic capabilities, thereby supporting back national interests and autonomy.

The article contributes to existing debates concerning hedging, technology diplomacy, and middle-power development strategies. First, it broadens understandings of hedging strategy by showing that hedging can serve developmental purposes alongside its traditional security function, particularly in supporting national technological transformation. Second, it develops the concept of functional technology diplomacy by demonstrating how technological partnerships can be mobilized for distinct developmental objectives. Third, it provides an

empirical account of how technological competition does not necessarily force smaller states into exclusive alignment. Vietnam's experience illustrates how middle powers can use technology diplomacy to engage competing technological ecosystems simultaneously, creating opportunities for cooperation, reducing pressures for strategic alignment, and contributing to a more stable international technological order.

## Literature review

### Đổi Mới 1.0 (1986-2025) and Vietnam's integration-led model of development

Existing studies of Vietnam's economic development and Đổi Mới broadly agree that Vietnam's transformation since 1986 combined domestic economic liberalization with international economic integration, but differ over the relative importance of market reforms and state capacity in shaping this process. One strand gives greater weight to market reforms. Fforde and De Vylder (1996) characterize Vietnam's early transition as substantially bottom-up, with state policy often responding to rather than initiating change. Subsequent studies demonstrate how WTO accession, free trade agreements, export expansion, and foreign direct investment consolidated an integration-led growth model (Vo & Nguyen, 2009; Nguyen & Truong, 2019).

A second interpretation emphasizes Vietnam's adaptive capacity to steer economic transformation. Van Arkadie and Mallon (2004) argue that Vietnam's achievements can be explained by pragmatic state adaptation, infrastructure and human-resource investment, and policy guidance toward longer-term development goals. This interpretation resonates with developmental state scholarship, which emphasizes the East Asian states' role in steering their economic transformation and leveraging external opportunities for development purposes (Johnson, 1982; Stiglitz, 1996). Yet some scholars argue that the Vietnamese case does not fit neatly within the classical developmental state model. Gainsborough (2010) questions the assumption of the state as a coherent, unitary actor, while Pincus (2018) highlights weak linkages between foreign-led growth and domestic productive capacity.

Taken together, existing literature suggests that Đổi Mới 1.0 developed through an evolving combination of national economic governance and international integration. However, much of this literature emerged in a context of globalization, expanding economic integration, and relatively stable production networks. As a result, it pays limited attention to a new context where access to critical technologies is shaped by geopolitical competition and technological fragmentation, as well as the declining suitability of the integration-led model for achieving Vietnam's ambition of becoming a developed country by 2045 (Thayer, 2026). Đổi Mới 2.0 marks a shift from integration-led to technology-led development for Vietnam. An integrated economy remains important, but Vietnam increasingly uses this integration to secure technologies, related networks and capabilities. This shift requires greater attention to how Vietnam mobilizes foreign policy for domestic upgrading.

### Đổi Mới as Vietnamese foreign policy

Existing literature generally recognizes Vietnamese foreign policy as an important instrument of Đổi Mới, helping Vietnam navigate external challenges, expand relations, support development and preserve autonomy. Three main strands emphasize different functions of this diplomatic approach.

One strand views Đổi Mới diplomacy as a developmental instrument through which Vietnam advances international integration and mobilizes external opportunities for development. For instance, Ha and Tien (2025) trace how diplomacy helps Vietnam overcome isolation and enhance its international standing, and Ha et al. (2020) link diplomacy to stronger economic performance, more diverse relations, and deeper participation in international institutions. Nguyen (2026b) points out that evolving developmental priorities shape the trajectory of Vietnam's foreign policies, and Ha et al. (2020) anticipate a change in foreign policy as conditions for development change during Đổi Mới 2.0.

A second interpretation emphasizes the role of Vietnam's multidirectional diplomacy in maintaining autonomy and reducing dependence. While Thayer (2016) traces the evolution of Vietnam's foreign policy principle of multilateralization and diversification (or đa phương hóa, đa dạng hóa), Chapman (2017) further shows how this approach operates through three channels: diversified partnerships, trade agreements, and multilateralism. In the Đổi Mới 2.0 context,

Chapman (2026) develops this logic further through the concept of strategic autonomy, whereby deeper and more diversified external engagement is combined with stronger domestic resilience and capacity for independent action.

A third strand interprets Vietnam's hedging strategy as a means of managing risks while retaining benefits under major-power competition. Le (2013) characterizes Vietnam's China policy after 1991 as a hedging strategy combining economic pragmatism, direct engagement, hard balancing, and soft balancing, reflecting the coexistence of strong political and economic ties with persistent pressures in the bilateral relationship. Phan (2024) shows how Vietnam extends this logic to cooperation with both the United States and China in the Mekong, seeking to reduce multiple vulnerabilities while avoiding being caught in intensifying competition. More recently, Nguyen (2025) brings this debate directly into the technological domain, conceptualizing Vietnam's response to U.S.-China technological competition as strategic pragmatism, a strategy of engaging both powers to secure technological gains and autonomy while reducing dependency.

Taken together, these interpretations highlight the roles of development, autonomy, and risk management in Vietnam's foreign policy, with recent scholarship extending these insights directly to technological competition. Yet the domestic and international dimensions remain insufficiently integrated, as existing approaches do not fully explain how national developmental priorities shape Vietnam's engagement with competing technological powers, or how that engagement is used to mobilize external resources for capability building. To address this linkage, this article conceptualizes developmental hedging as a development-oriented extension of conventional hedging.

### Technology diplomacy and technological competition

Technology diplomacy has emerged as an important domain of international relations. Garcia (2022) defines it as international dialogue and negotiation over digital policy and emerging technologies involving states, firms, civil society and other actors. Three perspectives are particularly relevant. First, studies of technological powers emphasize geopolitical competition and rule-shaping, showing how states compete over leadership, standards, governance, and ecosystems, potentially contributing to technological fragmentation (Zúñiga et al., 2024; Huang & Meng, 2025). Second, Garcia (2025) advances a development-centered perspective from the Global South, emphasizing technological access, diffusion, innovation, local priorities and ownership. Third, technological hedging studies examine how Southeast Asian states navigate U.S.-China competition to capture economic opportunities, manage risks, limit dependence, and preserve flexibility (Zhao, 2024; Lim & Roberts, 2026).

These perspectives differ in analytical direction. While major power studies examine how states use technology for external influence, Global South perspectives consider how external relations can build domestic capabilities. However, less is known about how middle powers selectively engage competing ecosystems to acquire different capabilities while sustaining cooperation across technological divides.

Building on these insights, this article conceptualizes functional technology diplomacy as selective engagement with competing ecosystems according to their distinct strengths. It can widen access to capabilities for national upgrading while potentially sustaining cooperation across ecosystems. Whereas developmental hedging explains why Vietnam leverages geopolitical competition while preserving autonomy, functional technology diplomacy explains how it does so through differentiated partnerships.

## Theoretical framework

### Đổi Mới 2.0 as developmental state

Developmental state theory explains how states pursue national development through strategic-sector targeting and active intervention (Woo-Cumings, 1999). In this article, the concept is understood through three variables: motivation, strategic-sector targeting, and state intervention. By these criteria, Đổi Mới 2.0 can be understood as a developmental-state project.

First, Đổi Mới 2.0's developmental motivation is reflected in the national goals of becoming an upper-middle-income country with modern industry by 2030 and a high-income developed country by 2045 (Communist Party of Viet Nam, 2026). These goals

require a shift from a development model centered on integration to one centered on technology and innovation, embodied in the concept of a "development-enabling state", or "nhà nước kiến tạo phát triển", that actively promotes structural transformation and technological upgrading (Ibid, 2026).

Second, Đổi Mới 2.0 translates the ambitions into clear priorities. Decision 21/2026/QĐ-TTg identifies ten strategic technology groups, including AI and digital technologies, semiconductors, next-generation mobile networks, advanced manufacturing, biotechnology, energy, cybersecurity and high-speed rail (Prime Minister of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 2026).

Third, these objectives are pursued through active state intervention. The Politburo's "Four Pillars" resolution package, particularly Resolution 57-NQ/TW on science, technology, innovation, and digital transformation and Resolution 59-NQ/TW on international integration, provides the institutional architecture for implementation (To, 2025). Together, these resolutions enable the state to identify priorities, mobilize resources, coordinate reforms, and steer public and private actors toward realizing technological development goals.

From this perspective, Vietnam's developmental motivation under Đổi Mới 2.0 can be summarized through two closely connected goals: national development and strategic autonomy. While the former refers to Vietnam's pursuit of modernization and higher income status, the latter refers to the ability to achieve these goals without excessive dependence on any external technological ecosystem. This motivation is reflected in Vietnam's emphasis on "independence, self-reliance and self-strengthening" alongside "multilateralisation and diversification of external relations" (To, 2026).

**Developmental hedging as strategic filter**

Hedging refers to a strategy of avoiding exclusive alignment while diversifying partnerships to retain benefits and reduce risks under uncertainty (Medeiros, 2005). Vietnam has frequently been analyzed through this lens, particularly for its multidirectional engagement with major powers.

This article conceptualizes developmental hedging as a development-oriented extension of conventional hedging, which retains the logic of balance, diversification, and risk management, but differs in its purpose and criterion of success. Rather than treating major-power competition mainly as a risk, developmental hedging also treats it as a resource environment that can be utilized. Success therefore involves not only preserving strategic autonomy but also converting relations with competing powers into access to technologies, knowledge, capital, infrastructure, and other critical resources for upgrading.

Under Đổi Mới 2.0, developmental hedging functions as the filter between Vietnam's development objectives and technology diplomacy. It translates the pursuit of development and autonomy into engagement with U.S. and Chinese technological ecosystems to pursue critical technologies and related resources while avoiding excessive dependence on either.

**Functional technology diplomacy as operational mechanism**

Technology diplomacy refers to the use of diplomacy to address technology-related issues through interactions among state and non-state actors (Garcia, 2022). Extending this definition, this article introduces functional technology diplomacy as the operational mechanism through which developmental hedging is implemented.

Following Garcia (2022), the analysis operationalizes technology diplomacy through three dimensions: diplomatic engagement, technological agenda, and actor participation. These capture, respectively, how Vietnam engages external partners, which technological priorities it pursues, and who contributes to implementation. Together, they provide a context for assessing how diplomatic activities are translated into technological outcomes.

This framework is consistent with Vietnam's Đổi Mới 2.0 foreign policy orientation, which emphasizes mobilizing external resources, leveraging technologies, and broadening participation across state, business, and societal actors for national development (To, 2026).

**Analytical framework**

Bringing these elements together, the analytical framework explains how Vietnam translates its development motivation into technological access under intensifying U.S.-China competition. Figure 1

summarizes the causal process and feedback mechanisms used in this article.

The framework begins with Vietnam' s developmental state motivation, defined by the pursuit of national interests and strategic autonomy. Under U.S.-China technological competition, these objectives are filtered through developmental hedging, through which Vietnam seeks to capture opportunities from both powers while managing the risks of excessive dependence. This translates broad motivations into a strategic objective: securing critical technologies from both U.S. and China.

Functional technology diplomacy is the operational mechanism, through which Vietnam pursues this objective across three dimensions: diplomatic engagement, technological agenda, and actor participation. Their interaction shapes the outcome, which is actual access to technologies and related resources from both ecosystems.

Successful technological access can contribute to domestic capability building and, if effectively absorbed and utilized, may reinforce national interests and strategic autonomy. These outcomes, in turn, feed back into developmental state motivation and may shape subsequent priorities and strategic choices.

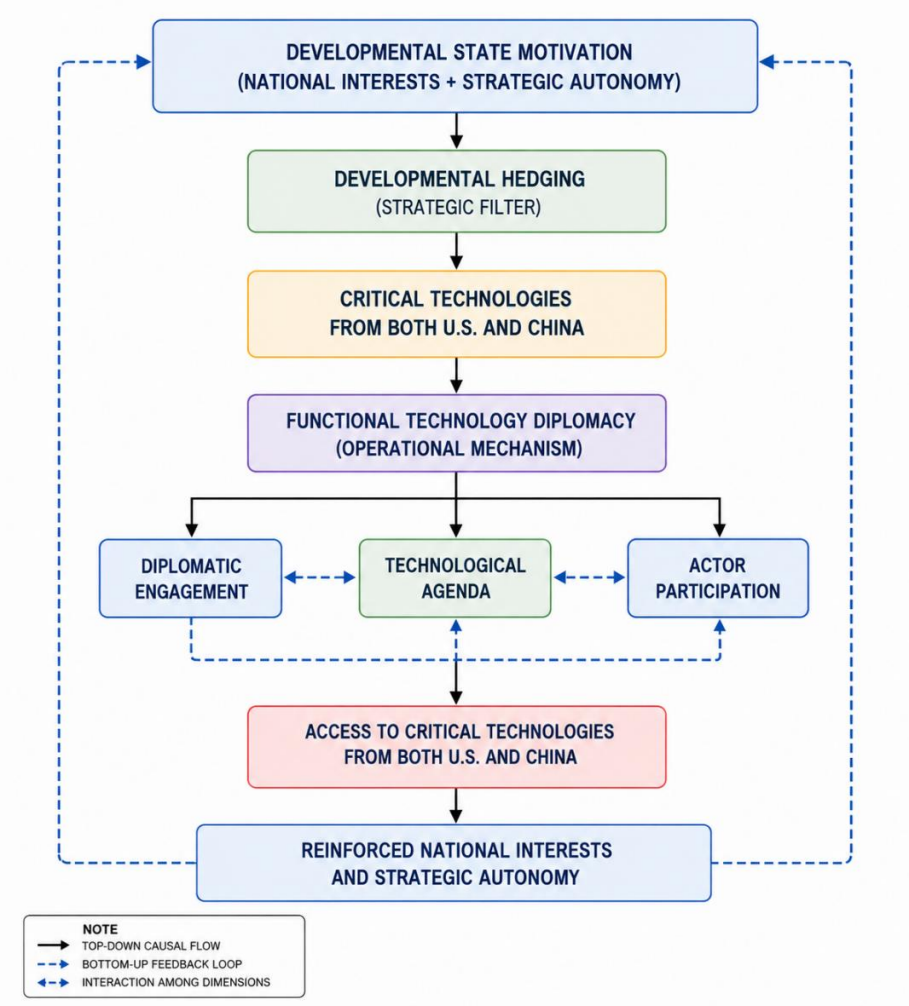


**Figure 1** Analytical framework of Vietnam's technology diplomacy toward the United States and China under Đổi Mới 2.0

**Research design and methods**

This article adopts qualitative documentary analysis and process tracing to examine how Vietnam's developmental strategy under Đổi Mới 2.0 is translated into technology diplomacy. Documentary analysis identifies technological engagement patterns, while process tracing examines the causal sequence linking developmental motivation, developmental hedging,

functional technology diplomacy, and technological access.

The study draws on three categories of evidence: relevant academic literature; official documents, including National Congress reports, Politburo resolutions, government strategies, bilateral statements, and remarks of senior decision-makers; and public materials from official media and institutions involved in Vietnam's technological cooperation. Documents were purposively selected for their relevance to the analytical framework and study period. Priority was given to official documents that articulate Vietnam's priorities, document technology-related engagement with the U.S. or China, or report concrete cooperation outcomes.

Documentary analysis is guided by the analytical framework. Within each case, evidence is organized around three dimensions: diplomatic engagement, technological agenda, and actor participation. The analysis examines engagement and technological objectives, participating state and non-state actors, and reported forms of technological access. Evidence is then compared across the U.S. and China cases to identify patterns of Vietnam's engagement with the two technological ecosystems.

Process tracing examines the causal sequence proposed by the analytical framework. It traces how developmental objectives and strategic autonomy concerns inform developmental hedging; how this orientation generates efforts to secure critical technologies from both ecosystems; and how these objectives are operationalized through functional technology diplomacy. The analysis examines connections between policy priorities, diplomatic activities, technological agendas, participating actors, partner responses, and reported outcomes. Responses from U.S. and Chinese counterparts help assess whether Vietnamese engagement generates technological access or encounters external constraints.

The analysis covers 2024-2026, which is the emergence and early implementation of Đổi Mới 2.0, from the leadership transition in mid-2024 through its formal consolidation at the Fourteenth National Congress in January 2026.

The U.S. and China are purposively selected as major technological powers central to global technological competition with extensive cooperation frameworks with Vietnam. Comparing the two cases enables the study to assess how Vietnam engages different ecosystems, how its partners respond, and what forms of technological access result from these engagements.

## Vietnam's technology diplomacy with the United States and China under Đổi Mới 2.0

### Vietnam's technology diplomacy with the United States

Vietnam's technology diplomacy with the U.S. builds on the 2023 Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP), which identified science, technology, and digital innovation as "a new breakthrough" in bilateral relations. The CSP prioritizes emerging technologies, semiconductors, secure digital infrastructure, 5G, innovation, and high-tech workforce development (VGP, 2023). Under Đổi Mới 2.0, Vietnam has sought to translate this framework into concrete technological access.

#### *Diplomatic engagement*

Vietnam's engagement with the U.S. operates through high-level, corporate, and broader institutional diplomacy. At the highest level, General Secretary To Lam visited the U.S. in September 2024 and February 2026. During his first visit, technology cooperation featured in discussions with President Joe Biden and engagements at the UN and Columbia University (Vietnam Embassy in the United States, 2024). His second visit mobilized political channels in Washington, including President Donald Trump, to address tariff pressures and restrictions affecting access to semiconductors and AI technologies. Trump's pledge to remove Vietnam from export-control restricted lists illustrates how high-level diplomacy can be used to address barriers to technological access (Reuters, 2026). These engagements show that political diplomacy can preserve room for technological cooperation when regulatory and geopolitical constraints emerge.

Vietnam also engages directly with U.S. technology businesses. Large-scale dialogues organized with the U.S.-ASEAN Business Council enable Vietnamese leaders to engage technology firms, attract high-value investment, and address investor concerns (Thuy, 2024). Such corporate diplomacy is frequently linked to high-level visits, connecting political

engagement with private firms that control substantial investment and innovation networks.

Multilateral and academic engagement performs a different function. At UN forums, Vietnam has presented itself as a constructive partner advocating technology for peace and shared prosperity rather than strategic competition (Quang, 2024). To Lam's dialogue at Columbia University similarly emphasized sustainable development, digital transformation, and international dialogue (VGP, 2024b). Although these engagements do not directly produce technological access, they contribute to information exchange, trust-building, and stronger connections with wider U.S. policy and knowledge networks.

***Critical technology agenda***

Vietnam's U.S. technology agenda concentrates on frontier technologies and capabilities, particularly semiconductors, AI, digital and energy infrastructure, and high-tech workforce development. These priorities align with both the CSP and Vietnam's domestic technology agenda under Resolution 57 and Decision 21. Chapman (2026) similarly links Vietnam's technological cooperation with the U.S. to broader efforts to strengthen domestic capabilities and move into higher-value segments of global supply chains. In semiconductors, Vietnam seeks investment in chip production, participation in U.S.-linked supply chains, and capabilities in chip design, manufacturing, and packaging (International Trade Administration, 2024). In AI, priorities include talent development, sovereign and resilient AI infrastructure, and governance and regulatory capacity (Ministry of Science and Technology, 2026a). Cooperation also extends to clean energy and advanced infrastructure, including LNG and HVDC systems supporting green industrialization (Thanh, 2026). U.S. investment and training partnerships further support Vietnam's goal of developing 50,000 semiconductor engineers and four national semiconductor laboratories by 2030 (VietnamPlus, 2024).

Taken together, these priorities show that Vietnam's U.S. agenda extends beyond acquiring technologies themselves to accessing advanced knowledge, investment, infrastructure, and human capital needed for domestic technological upgrading. The pattern therefore reflects a selective technological agenda centered on specific developmental needs.

***Actor participation***

Implementing this agenda involves multiple state and non-state actors with distinct functions. Vietnamese leaders provide direction through high-level diplomacy, while ministries, diplomatic agencies, local authorities, and specialized institutions translate bilateral commitments into specific programs. Firms connect these commitments with U.S. investment and innovation networks, while universities and research institutions support knowledge exchange and workforce development. Experts, students, and overseas Vietnamese communities provide additional channels for knowledge and professional connections (Quang et al., 2026).

This broad participation reflects the structure of technological cooperation itself. Access depends not only on interstate agreements but also on firms that invest and deploy technologies, institutions that produce and transfer knowledge, and specialists capable of absorbing and applying it. Vietnam's engagement with the U.S. therefore operates through interconnected networks, linking external technological access with domestic absorptive capacity.

***U.S. Response and technological access***

U.S. responses to Vietnam's technology diplomacy combine facilitation of technological access with regulatory and strategic conditionality. On the enabling side, cooperation has generated tangible links to U.S. frontier technologies, investment, innovation networks, and human-capital development. Major semiconductor and technology firms, including Qualcomm, Intel, Nvidia, Marvell, Synopsys, and Amkor, have expanded their presence or activities in Vietnam (East-West Center, 2025). Recent outcomes include Qualcomm's R&D center in Hanoi, GE Vernova's planned HVDC transformer facility in Hai Phong, and Arizona State University's cooperation with Hanoi on university capacity and innovation infrastructure (TH, 2026; GE Vernova, 2026; Arizona State University, 2026). U.S.-supported programs have also expanded technological skills and governance capacity, including AI training initiatives (Hanoi University of Science and Technology, 2026). These

outcomes indicate that bilateral engagement has widened access beyond technology itself to investment, research, knowledge, and training networks.

However, such access remains conditional. As Washington seeks more secure and diversified supply chains, U.S.-Vietnam technology cooperation has also been shaped by trade and supply chain concerns. The Trump administration's 46-percent reciprocal tariff on Vietnamese exports announced in April 2025 was followed by negotiations in which U.S. officials reportedly required Vietnam to improve supply chain transparency and reduce dependence on Chinese inputs (Guarascio & Nguyen, 2025). U.S. concerns also extend to technology governance and intellectual property (IP) protection. Washington has supported digital governance capacity building while simultaneously using regulatory instruments. In 2026, the U.S. Trade Representative (USTR) designated Vietnam a Priority Foreign Country under its Special 301 process and subsequently initiated a Section 301 investigation into its IP practices (Du, 2025; Office of the United States Trade Representative, 2026a, 2026b).

Vietnam responded through diplomatic negotiation and policy adjustment, including offers to increase purchases of U.S. high-tech products, address trade and supply chain concerns, and strengthen IP enforcement (Reuters, 2025; Ministry of Science and Technology, 2026b). The U.S. case therefore demonstrates both the possibilities and constraints of technological access. Engagement can widen Vietnam's access to advanced technologies, investment, knowledge, and human capital, but continued access requires managing U.S. concerns over trade, supply chains, intellectual property, and technological governance.

## Vietnam's technology diplomacy with China

Vietnam's technology diplomacy with China builds on the 2023 framework for a "Vietnam-China Community with a Shared Future that Carries Strategic Significance," which expanded cooperation in science, technology, innovation, transportation, the digital economy, and green development (State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2023). While sharing several diplomatic mechanisms with the U.S. case, engagement with China places greater emphasis on connectivity, infrastructure, and applied technological cooperation aligned with Vietnam's Đổi Mới 2.0 priorities.

### *Diplomatic engagement*

As in the U.S. case, high-level diplomacy provides political direction for technological cooperation. To Lam selected China as his first foreign destination after becoming General Secretary in August 2024 and again visited China soon after the beginning of his new presidential term in April 2026. These visits combined engagement with Chinese leaders, provincial authorities, and technology and infrastructure institutions. The 2026 visit produced 32 cooperation agreements covering areas including railway technology, customs modernization, capacity building, scientific research, and supply-chain connectivity (VNA, 2026). High-level diplomacy thus provided a channel for translating broad bilateral commitments into more specific areas of technological cooperation.

Vietnam similarly combines political engagement with corporate diplomacy. During his 2024 visit, To Lam encouraged Guangdong enterprises to invest in digital products, high-tech manufacturing, green development, logistics, and industrial supply chains. His engagement with technology firms, including Megvii, also addressed AI applications, talent development, and data governance (Hoang & Pham, 2025). As in the U.S. case, these activities connect political diplomacy with actors possessing technological and investment capabilities.

A more distinctive feature of engagement with China is connectivity-oriented and subnational diplomacy. Vietnam promotes both "hard connectivity" through railways and border infrastructure and "soft connectivity" through customs and digital links (VGP, 2024a). Railway cooperation has become particularly prominent, providing opportunities to engage Chinese expertise in standards, operations, infrastructure management, and implementation (He, 2026). Cooperation with neighboring Guangxi and Yunnan provinces further connects Vietnamese actors with Chinese railway, logistics, smart-border, and digital networks (Ministry of Agriculture and Environment, 2026). To Lam's 2026 engagement in Guangxi also included China-ASEAN AI cooperation initiatives (Van, 2026).

These patterns show that, while Vietnam employs high-level and corporate diplomacy in both cases, engagement with China relies more visibly on comprehensive connectivity projects, intergovernmental mechanisms, and subnational cooperation, linking technological diplomacy closely to infrastructure and cross-border modernization.

***Critical technology agenda***

Vietnam's technology agenda with China centers on infrastructure connectivity, industrial integration, and applied technologies. Railway cooperation is particularly important, providing Vietnam with technical training, feasibility studies, infrastructure experience, and access to Chinese railway expertise while more closely connecting the country with southwestern China and broader regional transport networks (Duan, 2026). Vietnam also pursues "soft connectivity" through smart customs, intelligent logistics systems, digital links, and local-currency settlement mechanisms to facilitate trade and industrial efficiency. High-tech workforce cooperation includes university partnerships, joint training, scholar exchanges, and collaborative research (Nguyen, 2026a). Cooperation has also expanded into AI, semiconductors, and green technologies, with significant attention to their application in Vietnam's development (Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 2026).

Compared with the U.S. agenda, these priorities place greater emphasis on infrastructure, connectivity, practical applications, and implementation capacity. The two cases therefore show that Vietnam does not pursue an identical technological agenda across its major power partnerships, but targets different forms of technological access according to its own priorities and available external opportunities.

***Actor participation***

Similar to the U.S. case, technological cooperation with China also involves state institutions, firms, universities, and other non-state actors, but its implementation gives greater prominence to intergovernmental and subnational coordination. High-level commitments are translated into projects through ministries, specialized mechanisms such as the Vietnam-China Joint Committee on Railway Cooperation, and provincial authorities (VNA, 2025b). Local governments are particularly important along planned railway and border connectivity corridors, where national agreements require coordination with infrastructure, logistics, and local development plans (VNS, 2025).

Businesses and universities complement these institutional channels. Vietnamese firms cooperate with Chinese partners in infrastructure, logistics, digital technology, and industrial development, while universities pursue technological innovation and talent development with Chinese counterparts (Thuy, 2026a). Compared with the U.S. case, the stronger role of governmental mechanisms and subnational authorities reflects the territorial and infrastructure-intensive character of much Vietnam-China technological cooperation.

**China's response and technological access**

Cooperation with China has expanded Vietnam's opportunities to access infrastructure, connectivity, and applied technologies, particularly through project-based cooperation and technical support. The result of railway diplomacy is particularly significant. China has provided technical assistance, feasibility studies, planning support, and workforce training for three standard-gauge railway projects linking the two countries (Ministry of Construction, 2025). The Lao Cai-Ha Noi-Hai Phong railway has entered the implementation stage, while planning for the Dong Dang-Ha Noi and Mong Cai-Ha Long-Hai Phong routes continues to advance. Cooperation in "soft connectivity" has also expanded through customs digitalization, electronic data exchange, smart-border systems, and cross-border payment mechanisms (VCB News, 2026; Thuy, 2026b).

Technological access extends beyond connectivity and infrastructure. Guangxi-Vietnam AI cooperation initiatives has also expanded through a Hanoi exhibition center and five specialized AI training programs involving more than 200 Vietnamese participants (Huu & Ho, 2026). Chinese investment in the Soc Son waste-to-energy plant, including its 2026 expansion, illustrates continued cooperation in applied green technologies (Trung, 2026). These initiatives indicate that engagement with China connects Vietnam with technologies and infrastructure, as well as

implementation experience and other capabilities relevant to national modernization.

Overall, China's response reveals a different configuration of technological access from the U.S. case. While U.S. cooperation is more visibly shaped by trade, regulatory, and governance considerations, engagement with China provides substantial access to infrastructure, connectivity, industrial capabilities, and applied technologies while deepening Vietnam's integration with Chinese production networks, supply chains, and industrial ecosystems. Recent research on Chinese investment in Vietnam's e-commerce and logistics similarly shows that deeper digital integration can expand access to technology and support economic transformation, while also increasing the need for stronger domestic regulation and technological autonomy (Vo et al., 2025). This deeper connectivity can support Vietnam's modernization, but also requires Hanoi to manage expanding linkages in ways consistent with its broader objective of maintaining strategic flexibility.

Table 1 summarizes the main dimensions of Vietnam's technology diplomacy toward the United States and China.

**Table 1** Vietnam's technology diplomacy toward the United States and China under Đổi Mới 2.0

| Dimension | United States | China |
|---|---|---|
| Main orientation | Frontier technologies and innovation | Infrastructure, connectivity, applied technologies |
| Technology agenda priorities | Semiconductors, AI, digital and energy infrastructure, high-tech workforce | Railways, logistics, smart connectivity, applied AI, green technologies |
| Diplomatic engagement approach | High-level, corporate, academic, innovation-network engagement | High-level, connectivity-oriented, corporate, subnational engagement |
| Key actors | State agencies, technology firms, business councils, research institutions | State agencies, local governments, firms, universities, bilateral mechanisms |
| Access and challenges | Advanced technology, investment, knowledge, talent training; Access shaped by trade, supply-chain, IP, and regulatory concerns | Infrastructure, industrial capabilities, implementation experience, talent training; Deeper connectivity requires management consistent with strategic autonomy |

**Analysis: Developmental hedging through functional technology diplomacy**

The U.S. and China cases show that technological cooperation creates both opportunities and constraints for Vietnam's Đổi Mới 2.0. Access to technologies and related resources can support domestic technological upgrading, while growing competition between ecosystems creates risks of limited access and excessive dependence. Vietnam's challenge is therefore not simply how to navigate U.S.-China competition, but how to leverage it for national development while preserving strategic autonomy. The empirical findings show Vietnam pursuing these objectives simultaneously by maintaining technological diplomacy with both powers, managing different constraints in each relationship, and mobilizing external technological resources for its priorities.

This pattern supports the concept of developmental hedging. There are two features remain consistent with conventional hedging: Vietnam maintains positive engagement with both the U.S. and China and diversifies its relationships to preserve room for manoeuvre and limit excessive reliance on either ecosystem. However, conventional hedging primarily explains how states manage geopolitical uncertainty by combining engagement and risk reduction to maximize benefits while preserving autonomy. The findings reveal an additional domestic-international linkage. Under Đổi Mới 2.0, Vietnam's national developmental priorities identify specific capabilities needed for technological upgrading, while its engagement with competing

powers is used to mobilize those external resources. Development is therefore not simply one of the benefits gained from hedging, but becomes an objective that shapes what Vietnam seeks externally and how it engages competing powers. This explicit linkage between managing external competition and pursuing state-defined domestic transformation is what this article conceptualizes as developmental hedging. It extends conventional hedging by connecting its logic of risk management and autonomy to the active mobilization of external resources for domestic capability building.

The findings further show how developmental hedging is operationalized through functional technology diplomacy. Rather than designing an identical technological agenda for both powers, Vietnam's engagement differs according to the resources and opportunities available in each relationship. Cooperation with the U.S. places greater emphasis on frontier technologies, including semiconductors and AI, alongside innovation networks, high-value investment, governance knowledge, and advanced workforce development. Engagement with China, while also expanding into frontier technologies, is more strongly associated with infrastructure connectivity, standard-gauge railway systems, logistics, industrial capabilities, and applied solutions. This difference does not imply an exclusive division of technological roles, as cooperation with both partners overlaps across several sectors. Nevertheless, some resources accessed through the two relationships may be complementary in supporting various dimensions of domestic upgrading. Functional technology diplomacy therefore enables Vietnam to broaden and diversify options by engaging different technological ecosystems in ways that correspond to its evolving priorities.

Functional differentiation is also visible in how technological cooperation is conducted and which actors participate. Engagement with the U.S. relies strongly on technology corporations, business councils, universities, research institutions, and innovation networks, reflecting the importance of private investment, advanced knowledge, and talent development. By comparison, cooperation with China operates more through intergovernmental mechanisms, specialized joint committees, provincial authorities, infrastructure institutions, and firms, particularly in railway, logistics, and cross-border connectivity projects. This variation suggests that functional technology diplomacy involves not only distinct agendas but also diplomatic channels and actor arrangements tailored to specific technological and institutional contexts. Vietnam thus mobilizes multiple forms of technology diplomacy rather than applying a uniform model across its relationships.

Technological access alone, however, does not guarantee development. Its value depends on Vietnam's capacity to absorb, adapt, and apply external resources. The two cases show that technology diplomacy extends beyond acquiring technologies and investment to include training, joint research, university partnerships, technical assistance, and knowledge exchange. These activities help build the human and institutional capabilities needed to translate external resources into long-term development. This finding reinforces the developmental-state logic: external engagement creates opportunities, but their benefits depend on domestic capacity to absorb and utilize them. Strategic autonomy similarly requires not only diversified technological partnerships but also Vietnam's own ability to use and eventually develop critical technologies.

At the same time, developmental hedging does not remove the constraints created by technological interdependence. The U.S. case shows that Vietnam's access to advanced technologies and innovation networks can be affected by U.S. concerns and requirements. Engagement with China presents another challenge, which is deep connectivity can increase Vietnam's integration with Chinese infrastructure, production and supply chains. The two cases therefore expose Vietnam to different forms of constraint within asymmetric technological relationships. This finding has an important implication for Vietnam. Beyond multilateralization and diversification, Vietnam should therefore identify and manage the specific vulnerabilities associated with each relationship when designing its technology diplomacy, particularly where asymmetric interdependence could generate pressure, mistrust, or dependency.

Alternative explanations should also be considered. Vietnam's engagement with both the U.S. and China could be interpreted as a continuation of its longstanding policy of multilateralization and diversification, rather than as developmental hedging. Economic pragmatism may provide another

explanation, whereby Vietnam simply pursues technological and investment opportunities wherever they are available. Moreover, the observed differentiation between the two cases may be partly partner-driven, as the U.S. and China both possess unique technological strengths, institutional structures, and willingness to provide particular resources. These explanations are compatible with, rather than necessarily competing with, the proposed framework. Developmental hedging adds explanatory value by connecting external diversification more explicitly to national development priorities under conditions of technological competition. Functional technology diplomacy, meanwhile, captures how Vietnam responds selectively to opportunities available from each relationship through distinct technological agendas, diplomatic channels, and patterns of actor participation. The framework therefore does not imply that Vietnam fully determines the form of cooperation. Rather, technological engagement emerges from the interaction between Vietnam's developmental objectives and the opportunities and constraints presented by its external partners.

These findings are subject to several limitations. First, the 2024-2026 period captures the formulation and early implementation of Đổi Mới 2.0, so technological access and announced cooperation therefore cannot yet demonstrate long-term developmental effects. Second, although official documents and statements provide substantial evidence of Vietnam's stated developmental objectives, they offer less visibility into the internal decision-making process in which choices among alternative partners and technologies are made. Therefore, the study can identify patterns of differentiated engagement but cannot fully determine the extent to which these patterns reflect Vietnamese choices rather than opportunities shaped by external partners. Finally, focusing on the U.S. and China captures the two most consequential technological powers for this study but does not represent the full range of Vietnam's partnerships. Examining other technology diplomacy partners of Vietnam would provide a broader test of the framework.

The findings also suggest a potential systemic implication of functional technology diplomacy by middle powers. By maintaining balanced engagement with competing technological ecosystems, countries such as Vietnam may help preserve channels of dialogue and cooperation across geopolitical divides. Such engagement is unlikely to solve fragmentation, but it may contribute to sustaining cross-ecosystem connectivity as major-power competition intensifies. This suggests a possible role for technology diplomacy in sustaining international cooperation. Future comparative research could examine whether similar strategies among other middle powers collectively strengthen trust and cooperation across increasingly fragmented technological environments.

Taken together, the findings clarify the distinctive but connected roles of the three components of the analytical framework. The developmental state perspective identifies Vietnam's core objectives of technological upgrading and greater autonomy. Developmental hedging explains the logic through which Vietnam manages the risks of major-power competition while mobilizing external resources for these ambitions. Functional technology diplomacy explains how this strategy is operationalized through technological agendas, diplomatic channels, and actor participation tailored to particular relationships. The immediate outcome is therefore not technological independence or completed domestic transformation, but broader and more diversified access to technological resources and opportunities. Whether such access ultimately produces sustained technological upgrading and greater strategic autonomy depends on Vietnam's capacity to absorb these resources while continuing to manage the constraints of technological interdependence.

**Conclusion**

This article has examined Vietnam's technology diplomacy toward the United States and China under Đổi Mới 2.0 through the lenses of the developmental state, developmental hedging, and functional technology diplomacy. The findings suggest that Vietnam maintains simultaneous engagement with both powers while seeking different forms of technological access for national development purposes. Engagement with the U.S. emphasizes frontier technologies, innovation networks, advanced investment, and human-capital development, while cooperation with China is more strongly associated with infrastructure, connectivity, industrial capabilities, and applied

technologies. Some of these resources may perform complementary functions in supporting Vietnam's technological upgrading.

The article makes two main conceptual contributions. First, developmental hedging extends conventional hedging by establishing a clearer linkage between external risk management and domestic transformation. Development is not simply a benefit gained from diversified engagement; rather, national development priorities shape the resources Vietnam seeks from competing powers and how these relationships are managed. Second, functional technology diplomacy explains how this strategy is implemented through technological agendas, diplomatic channels, and actor participation tailored to particular relationships. Together, these concepts help explain how a middle power can navigate technological competition while mobilizing resources for capability building and preserving room for manoeuvre.

These conclusions should nevertheless be considered within the study's empirical boundaries. Because Đổi Mới 2.0 remains at an early stage, future longitudinal research should examine whether technological access and related opportunities produce sustained benefits. Further research on policy formulation could clarify how Vietnamese decision-makers select among technological partners and opportunities. Comparative studies incorporating Vietnam's cooperation with other partners could also test whether functional technology diplomacy extends beyond the U.S.-China context and identify the conditions under which various partnerships become complementary.

More broadly, Vietnam's experience suggests that technological competition does not necessarily result in exclusive alignment. Non- exclusive engagement by middle powers may help maintain channels of dialogue, exchange, and practical cooperation across competing ecosystems. Whether such strategies can collectively mitigate technological fragmentation remains an open question. Comparative research across middle powers could therefore examine whether functional technology diplomacy can contribute to sustaining technological connectivity and cooperation under conditions of intensifying geopolitical competition.

**Declaration of generative AI in scientific writing**

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**CRediT author statement**

**Khanh Ha Phan:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal analysis, Investigation, Writing - Original draft, Writing - Review & Editing, Visualization.

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