



## Vietnam and the Specter of Deglobalization



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### [ *Abstract* ]

Just as globalization has many aspects and has developed in various, sometimes contradictory ways with both positive and negative impacts, so too would the reverse process of deglobalization have wide-ranging effects for individuals, communities, and nations. Some parts of globalization began to fray during the coronavirus pandemic (e.g. failing supply chains and disarray in the global shipping industry). Deglobalization would bring about much more significant changes in focusing on local production and consumption, eschewing non-essential flights and international tourism, and replacing personal experience with virtual presence. These impacts would be particularly severe for Vietnam, since its government has placed intensive connectivity with global production at the center of its model for the rapid development on which much of its legitimacy rests and it has joined as many international, multilateral organizations, and protocols as it has been able to do. Through critical analysis of secondary data from a wide range of sources, this paper examines the motivations that people, institutions, and governments might have to pursue deglobalization and

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then seeks evidence for whether the changes that would bring have started to affect Vietnam. While it is difficult to be too certain about this while the pandemic continues, it is evident that pressures are building in the global north to reconfigure supply chains for greater security, to reduce carbon emissions through regulating long-distance exchanges, and to withdraw from personal contacts. It is argued that a focus on digitalization in economy and society will help to mitigate the negative effects of deglobalization on Vietnam, at least in the medium-term.

**Keywords:** deglobalization, digitalization, economic development, globalization, Vietnam

## I . Introduction

In recent decades, globalization has appeared to be an irresistible force installing ever deeper forms of neoliberalism in every corner of the world. The dictum of the neoliberals, acquired from former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher that “there is no alternative” seemed to have an air of historical inevitability about it. Governments might seek to negotiate an opt-out here or there but had little choice but to accept their place in the new world order. However, the emergence of the coronavirus pandemic has brought about a “revenge of the real” (Bratton 2021) that not only betokens the re-emergence of a new biopolitics but also indicated the fragility of the global economic order, reliant as it has become on lengthy and complex transnational supply chains. This fragility has lent more strength to a developing movement towards deglobalization resulting from awareness of the climate emergency and both positive and negative political forces. Appadurai (1990) observed that previous instances of transnational interactions resulted from warfare or religious expansionism. What is different in contemporary globalization is the role of technology in democratizing forms of interaction. These are forms of technology that have become central to the daily life of billions of people around the world. Although there have been calls that the internet must be completely

dismembered for there to be any hope of surviving the current crisis of capitalism (e.g. Crary 2022), there will be numerous problems for states obliged to disentangle themselves from international interactions, if that comes to pass. Currently, the Vietnamese government has become committed to a digitalization process that will knit together all parts of the country and, among other goals, make many public services available online. This has in part been spurred by the response of providers of online education during the coronavirus period. The vision for the country is much greater involvement in international networks and exchanges. Transnational supply chains can only be successfully created and maintained during peacetime and offer additional space to government and civil institutions to negotiate with partners to enhance relationships and reduce tensions. For a country such as Vietnam, which has based its contemporary political and economic strategy on engagement with the outside world, the prospect of deglobalization is indeed a specter, a threat to the inmost being and a means of undermining everything that has been built since 1986 and the return to the international stage. During the colonial period, Vietnam was deeply connected to the rest of the world but in ways in which Vietnamese people had little if any agency. From the revolution to 1986, it was isolated and boycotted. The emergence of the country in the doi moi period involved not just a move to employing market mechanisms in economic development but also engagement with the outside world as an equal. Giving up globalization would be a significant blow not just to the country's economic system but to its entire strategy. It would represent a threat to the legitimacy of the ruling Communist Party.

To some extent, deglobalization has been theorized by Polanyi (2001) in the concept of the double movement. According to this concept, a first revolutionary step is taken and then met by a reactionary response seeking to realign the various forces as they previously were. In this sense, the first step is the creation of a market economy with some free-market characteristics and the second movement is the creation of trade rules, labor protection schemes and so forth. The greater the initial step has been, the more that the phenomenon involved has become disembedded from

society and the greater the second movement will need to be to redress the new situation. As a holistic approach (and Polanyi has been criticized for being contradictory on this point (Gemici 2008), embeddedness becomes: "...an analytical construct to discern the changing place of economy in society throughout human history (ibid.)" and the market economy is prodigious in being the world's first disembedded economic system. Should globalization be seen, therefore, as an embedded system which cannot be reversed? There are certainly indications, as described below, that this is not the case and the deglobalization will take place—some will argue that it must take place.

This paper considers the issue of the extent to which deglobalization and the post-pandemic new normal might really affect Vietnam and what might be done to try to offset any such problems. It continues with a description of Vietnam's engagement with globalization through economic, political and diplomatic means, as well as an appreciation of the benefits of engagement to a country facing the particular political issues that it does face. It then continues with analysis of the various factors that are leading towards deglobalization, broadly defined and, finally, a consideration of what might be achieved through reconfiguration of the country's economic and diplomatic resources in the face of this new threat. The paper is influenced by an eclectic approach to considering the country as a whole that is derived in part from Pettigrew's (1997) description of processual analysis as a methodological approach which recognizes temporality, contextuality, and complexity in the phenomenon being studied. In doing so, it builds on the practice familiar to students of international business of employing an eclectic paradigm to explain business success or failure (Dunning 2000)—the approach can be fruitful in a wide range of contexts when a higher level of theory has yet to be fully established. In this case, aspects of deglobalization and the country's response to its existence have been selected to illustrate the argument that deglobalization would be disastrous for Vietnam and should be addressed. There is scope for rigorous quantitative and qualitative research to substantiate the argument.

This paper is not just tied to the case of Vietnam but has

wider application to other countries that have become embedded within transnational chains as their approach to achieving rapid economic development. It has taken on fresh urgency with the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the resultant extensive sanctions placed on Russia by western countries as a result. To counteract these sanctions, at least in part, Russia has sought to reinvigorate its relationship with China and other countries which have not condemned the invasion. It is possible, therefore, that the world will turn to a two-bloc system of USA-Europe opposed by Russia-China. Third party countries will be obliged to choose one of these sides and either uphold or reject the use of sanctions. Vietnam's longstanding relationship with Russia would make it very difficult to side with the West and there are likely to be serious ramifications resulting from this. It is important to be aware of the high stakes that such a decision would involve.

## II. The Benefits of Globalization

Globalization involves both increasing global connectivity and increasing global consciousness, relevant at the level of the nation-state, world politics, and individuals, acting through the dimensions of politics, economics, culture, and society (Robertson and White 2007). It is characterized by worldwide changes in both production and consumption. People can consume various kinds of media production that would have been unavailable before internet technology, while being involved in production of components that might have been designed in one country, assembled in another and distributed to markets in remote third countries. Countries that have benefited from global consumption tend to be those who can mobilize soft power in the form of media output such as Hollywood, Bollywood, and the Korean *Hallyu*. Countries that have benefited from global production tend to have been those such as Vietnam which introduced a model of import-substituting, export-oriented, intensive manufacturing based on low labor cost competitiveness through the operation of the New International Division of Labor (NIDL) (Frobel, Heinrichs and Kreye 1976). Although most production that takes place in Vietnam is destined for export, there

is an emergent aspirational middle class, mostly urban in location, which is generally enthusiastic in participating in new consumption opportunities. These include not just consumer goods and services but also international education and travel when that has been possible.

Vietnam has been able to maximize its economic gains using the special economic zones (SEZ) approach, which encourages inflows of foreign direct investment (FDI) into specific areas where special legal regimes have been put into practice which (further) privilege capital over labor. The Chinese example, which saw hundreds of millions of people lifted out of poverty by this approach in an unprecedented economic success story, showed what could be achieved in the economic sphere without the government having to make any concessions to political plurality. China focused on coastal areas which offered reduced shipping and transportation costs and which could be isolated from the rest of the economy if necessary. Vietnam's geography offers many opportunities for coastal zones; areas around the two major cities and in the Mekong delta region have also been targeted. In general, the Vietnamese government, in common with others, sees the benefit in enhancing its legitimacy with the people through achieving economic success while maintaining a strong grip on freedom of speech, freedom of association, and other rights.

<Table 1> Inwards FDI in Vietnam, selected year; source: World Bank (2022).

Year	Amount (US\$)	Year	Amount (US\$)
1980	1.7 m	2005	2.0 bn
1985	-80,000	2010	8.0 bn
1990	180 m	2015	11.8 bn
1995	1.8 bn	2019	16.1 bn
2000	1.3 bn		

Inwards FDI is beneficial not just in terms of the direct effects of employment and taxation but also through technology transfer and spillover effects. Technology transfer means bringing new

technology from overseas into the local economy (e.g. in Vietnam, the creation of a modern retail sector) while spillover effects include showing the response of local companies to more competitive overseas companies (e.g. in Vietnam, the upgrading of local Vietnamese coffee shops in the wake of the arrival of Starbucks and similar chains). These changes have contributed to the rises in living standards for Vietnamese people and in the emergence of a new, urban middle class. In line with what has been said about the SEZ policy, Earl (2013) has argued that these lifestyle changes have not been accompanied by changes in values disseminated through officially sanctioned media.

Economic data reveal just how much Vietnam's economy has been integrated with that of the rest of the world. The structure of Vietnam's labor market has changed as would be expected for a country undergoing rapid industrialization. In 2000, 62.2% of the employed labor force worked in agriculture, forestry, and fisheries, 13.0% in industry and construction and 24.8% in services. By 2020, those figures had changed to 33.1%, 30.8%, and 36.1% (GSO 2020: 28). Meanwhile, the number of waged workers had increased from 33.4% in 2009 to 48.4% in 2019 (*ibid.*: 29). The contribution of inward FDI to the growth of the Vietnamese economy may be judged by the fact that it is estimated (as the figures are not released) that more than one quarter of the country's total exports by value is accounted for by Samsung alone (Vietnam Credit 2020).

The benefits of globalization to Vietnam are political and diplomatic just as much as economic. Common membership of international or transnational organizations provides opportunities for informal negotiations and lobbying in the form that used to be known as "ping pong diplomacy" (Itoh 2011)—that is, diplomacy which could be pursued on the sidelines of international table tennis tournaments, which was one of the very few sporting or cultural events in which China participated. The term is now no longer needed as China has emerged into the mainstream of international relations. Such diplomacy may or may not be directly related to the stated aims of the organization involved. As Table 2 shows, Vietnam has entered into many international agreements in a limited period of time. The collapse of the Soviet system required

the Vietnamese government to reinvent its economic stance to embrace market characteristics, which it did under the concept of *doi moi*—reform. However, nearly a decade more was to pass before the US announced the ending of its embargo and a further year, in 1995, before normal diplomatic relations were established. In the same year, Vietnam joined the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and, in the following year, joined the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM), together with the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation Forum (1998) and the World Trade Organization (WTO) (2007), along with many other engagements with the world.

<Table 2> Vietnam’s International Economic and Strategic Relationships, selected; source: Various references.

Type of Agreement	Details
Free Trade Agreements	26 in total; 9 proposed/under consultation and study; 3 negotiations launched; 13 signed and in effect; 1 discontinued
	ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA) (1993); ASEAN-Australia and New Zealand FTA (AANZFTA) (2010); ASEAN-India FTA (AIFTA) (2010); ASEAN-Japan Comprehensive Economic Partnership (AJCEP) (2008); ASEAN-Republic of Korea FTA (2007); Chile-Vietnam FTA (CVFTA) (2014); Japan-Vietnam Economic Partnership Area (JVEPA) (2009); Vietnam-Eurasian Economic Union (2016); Republic of Korea-Vietnam FTA (VKFTA) (2015); Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) (2019); Vietnam-European Union FTA (EVFTA) (2020); Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) (2022)
Comprehensive Strategic Partnerships	China (2008); Russia (2012); India (2016)
Strategic Partnerships	Japan (2006); Republic of Korea (2009); Spain (2009); UK and Northern Ireland (2010); Germany (2011); Italy (2013); France (2013); Indonesia (2013); Thailand (2013); Singapore (2013); Malaysia (2015); Australia (2018)
Comprehensive Partnerships	South Africa (2004); Venezuela (2007); Chile (2007); Brazil (2007); New Zealand (2009); Argentina (2010); Ukraine (2011); USA (2013); Denmark (2013); Myanmar (2017); Canada (2017); Republic of Korea (2018); Brunei (2019); Netherlands (2019)

It is notable that majority of these organizations and treaties have been joined on the grounds of economics rather than for social or civil grounds. This follows the model of ASEAN, which is organized on similar lines. While these measures of engagement with the external world during the period of reform might suggest an ideological shift within the central government, this does not appear to be the case and government sources remain committed to Marxism-Leninism. Instead, “As a result of globalization, Vietnam has a widely expanded repertoire of models and examples to choose from in responding to the challenges and opportunities of globalization (Elliott 2012: 5).”

Any such change should be understood in the context of Vietnam’s geography and history. Vietnam was colonized by China for a thousand years and the war of 1979 led to an unknown number of Vietnamese casualties with estimates in six figures. The weight of that nightmare heavily oppresses the brains of the living. Nearly every geopolitical event in Asia is scrutinized for its impact on the Sino-Vietnamese relationship. Tensions can very quickly rise: in 2018, nationwide protests broke out on the announcement of a new law related to the SEZ policy that would permit international investors, including Chinese, to take out 99-year leases of land in a small number of locations (Fawthrop 2018). Meanwhile, at the beginning of 2022, pre-existing tensions exacerbated the situation surrounding some 6,000 lorries on the Vietnamese side of the border as Chinese authorities refused to reconsider their policy on the eradication of the COVID-19 virus in all its variants (Reuters 2022). This has coincided with the inauguration of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), which was expected to improve trade facilitation and reinvigorate supply chains that had frayed during the pandemic period. This made it more difficult to address the very substantive issues with which Vietnam would like to negotiate (on a multilateral basis) with China. These issues contain complexities sufficient to be beyond existing international law. There are two specific issues: the contested islands in the East Sea (outside of Vietnam known as the South China Sea) and riverine management. These issues do not affect Vietnam alone but several Southeast Asian neighbors as well. Consequently, the ability to

convene multilateral rather than bilateral talks in these cases would considerably help Vietnam. It would be hyperbolic to claim that Vietnam is facing an existential threat under current circumstances but international conflict involving the USA and China would certainly represent serious difficulties for the country and its people which deglobalization would exacerbate.

Although the paper has so far discussed events and tendencies primarily at the national level, globalization has certainly offered opportunities to people at the household and individual levels that deserve to be considered. There are some 4.5 million ethnic Vietnamese living overseas, the majority of whom fled the country at the end of the Second Indochinese War (i.e. the Vietnam War). The largest proportions live in countries welcoming refugees, such as the USA and Australia, or neighboring countries. Many Vietnamese now are keen to study, live and work overseas, partly for the experience and partly for an escape from sometimes claustrophobic family relationships. Capital may be exported to build lives overseas, which movement is the opposite of remittances returning to Vietnam from the many thousands of overseas migrant workers. Coronavirus strictures significantly affected both groups of people, particularly migrant workers who might have lost their jobs and been left stranded overseas. Certain Vietnamese corporations (some with links to the government) have begun to look overseas to expand their markets, as well as help enact state-level developmental goals on behalf of the government (e.g. Walsh 2021). Where pathbreakers lead, other Vietnamese corporations will be sure to follow, and they too would suffer from a reversal of the globalization process.

### **III. Deglobalization**

There has been a strain of quietism or asceticism that predates deglobalization but derives from similar tendencies. These instances were often motivated by socio-economic reasons, such as identifying the other as undesirable or hiding the way that social relations were organized in a specific context. Sometimes the

rejection of the external was a valid and often quite successful response to the threat of others: China, Japan, and Korea all closed themselves to external traffic to varying degrees as a means of fending off potential conquest and imperialism. Such a strategy may appear unnatural to countries of the West, but given the histories of countries that were colonized by European powers, was both reasonable and efficacious. After all, the spread of trade routes around the world is also the creation of the network that will spread disease and contagion. This has been made evident in the spread of the COVID-19 virus, which inspired several countries to isolate themselves from the rest of the world for varying periods of time.

Connectivity between remote people has always had two aspects, although human optimism has tended to laud the positive aspects and gloss over the negative ones. Even today, one strand of the rejection of globalization rests on antipathy to modernity or change. This has manifested itself in many ways: in the history of the British economy, there are numerous examples of workers taking the newly imposed and improved means of production into their own hands and breaking them to maintain a measure of power in their own hands (Mueller 2021). In the English Civil War (1642-51 CE), neutralist uprisings of so-called “clubmen” resisted attempts by either Royalists or Parliamentarians to enter what they considered to their territory (Underdown 1979)—and this is a phenomenon found across Europe during the wars of the C17<sup>th</sup>.

There is no doubt that when change of this sort did come to affect communities, the results were often very damaging to social relations and the ways in which people were able to obtain their livelihoods. The archetype of this was Enclosure, which brought about “...not simply a physical fencing of land but the extinction of common and customary use rights on which many people depended for their livelihood (Meiksins Wood 2017: 108).” The very same effects are taking place across the developing world where people are being resettled to make way for dams, bridges, special economic zones, and all the infrastructures of the globalized country. This is occurring across Asia and particularly in mainland Southeast Asia.

Since globalization involves the development of different

dimensions and realms, so should deglobalization involve the diminution of the same number of dimensions and realms. The realm of economics is important but it is not the only one. The desire for deglobalization may be divided into four somewhat overlapping tendencies. These all involve various realms, including the economic, the political, the social, and the cultural. The first is in response to the climate impact of existing globalization and its processes; the second is political-economic in nature and decries globalization's promotion of existing and new forms of inequality; the third incorporates a feminist view of contemporary design of urban structures with the 15 minutes city, the sharing society and the circular economy; the final approach is from the willful inward turn of autocrats and would-be autocrats who wish to close their countries to the outside world for a variety of mostly dismal reasons. These will be dealt with individually as follows.

### **3.1. The Climate Emergency: Small Is Beautiful**

There is a school of thought that continual growth of any sort in human affairs is physically unsustainable. Malthus (2008), for example, used a flawed methodology to argue that food supplies as then imagined could not support the foreseeable increase in population. This approach found further expression in the work of Schumacher (1993) who argued that contemporary capitalism was leading towards increasingly wasteful use of scarce resources by large corporations. In its place, attention should be focused on smaller-scale systems based on meeting actual needs with available resources. There is a clear message that if demand exceeds the supply of resources, then demand will have to be curtailed in one way or another. Schumacher's work resonates with James Lovelock's (1979) work on the Gaia hypothesis, which posits the Earth as an interlocking, living system that is damaged by the excesses of over-consumption and might even be overwhelmed by it. The Gaia system has a theoretical limit to production under current understanding of technology and that consumption should be linked to that amount. There is a sharp edge to this analysis, which dates to Malthus at least, who argued that since overpopulation would inevitably lead to the poor suffering the most, the kindest thing to

do would be to let them all starve. This argument was taken to its logical, satirical extent in the *Modest Proposal* of Jonathan Swift (2009), who proposed eating the children of the impoverished Irish as a practical means of making ends meet. Acts of eugenics do take place at the individual level, as the abortions of millions of unwanted girls in India and China attest (Eklund and Purewal 2017) and, historically, in Vietnam as well.

Perhaps the central question to be considered in this respect is whether sufficient food can be delivered to the people of the world at an affordable price in the context of the global climate emergency. Even before pandemic, hundreds of millions of people were suffering from food insecurity to some extent, according to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations (UN) (FAO 2015). The scale of food insecurity includes not just the inability to eat because of lack of food but also the lack of access to customary, nutritious food that has contributed to the obesity crisis across the developed world (e.g. Dhurandhar 2016). To produce food at the current level, producers have resorted to extensive use of economies of scale and scope and multinational supermarket systems driven by the desire for profits.

Unfortunately, this system produces significant negative externalities. A recent report by the Rockefeller Foundation (2021) estimated that, considering the US\$1.1 trillion spent by US consumers on food in 2019, when factoring in the contribution to water and air pollution, loss of biodiversity, and greenhouse gas emissions, the real cost was some US\$3.2 trillion per year, nearly thrice as much. Many factors work together to bring about this situation, including the hold that corporations have on political institutions, not just in the USA but worldwide. Wallace (2016) has chronicled the presence of intensive farming practices globally and the threat of life-threatening viruses and disease. Indeed, the most likely cause of COVID-19 was a zoonotic leap from bats to humans first observed in or around the city of Wuhan in China. It mirrors a similar origin for the earlier SARS outbreak, which has been strongly linked with horseshoes bats in Yunnan province (e.g. Yu et al. 2019). These leaps across the species seem most likely to have occurred because of unprecedented contact between diverse species

resulting from the destruction of the habitat of one by the other. Many species of bats were largely unknown to science until very recently.

Further to these problems, the approach to agriculture favored by the instruments of the Washington Consensus is to intensify the move towards globalization. This is problematic in many ways. Bello (2009) argues that not only does the large agro-industry model lead to inequitable and unsustainable practices but also dramatically undermine to the point of destruction the peasant populations of the world, with disastrous results for their quality of life and for human rights and democracy. Peasants may have a bad reputation politically (Bello notes that Marx (1852) considered them little more than a sack of potatoes) but they have demonstrated resilience and a capacity for reinvention that Bello considers to be worthy not just of respect but of emulation. Their survival is important for sustainability, political, and equity issues. In the case of Vietnam, agriculture has historically been based on rice production and rice consumption represents the great majority of nutrition for all or nearly all Vietnamese people (Gorman 2019). Rice growing in rural areas leans on intra-village household cooperation and is bound in traditional seasonality. The country benefited from the green revolution in rice production up until 2003, with varieties introduced from the International Rice Research Institute in the south and from China in the north, together with effective local management and innovation, contributing significantly to enhanced food security (Tran and Kajisa 2006), which is defined in Vietnamese law as “rice security” (Gorman 2019). Even so, various factors in the capitalist development of the country have led to the rapid increase in meat consumption among Vietnamese people and meat production lends itself to different expressions of economies of scale and scope that rearranges agricultural production norms (Hansen 2018). The Vietnamese government also works with local communities to concentrate on production of specialty goods which depend on specific geographic and climatic conditions, and which can link the communities with international markets. Fish farming (Vietnam News 2017) and ginseng growing (Vietnam News 2019) are among the activities to receive this attention. Combined with the

increasingly obvious effects of the climate emergency, these changes to production and consumption risk removing agency from local producers and giving it instead to capitalist producers. It also indicates the increasing internationalization of the Vietnamese economy, not just in terms of exporting commodities but also in producing for gourmet domestic restaurants and international hotels. The Vietnamese government has made various commitments to developing agriculture in this light as part of its digitalization strategy (Dharmaraj 2022). Its SEZ strategy is based on inwards FDI of leading international companies and one of its greatest problems is preparing local small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) so that the incoming companies will be willing to make partnerships with them, while also producing people who can thrive in the environment of a large, overseas firm.

The analysis of agricultural production resonates with the small is beautiful paradigm. It has grown in importance because of the increasing awareness of the contribution to the global climate emergency of air travel and the decision by some high-profile individuals to refuse to fly as a result. The Swedish environmental campaigner Greta Thunberg has been a noted leader in this issue (Jang et al. 2020). If personal travel by air is considered to be an unsustainable practice, then so too must be the flying of perishable products around the world for profit. One well-known product in this category is baby sweetcorn, which is flown from Thailand to enliven the once dowdy supermarkets of Britain at great cost in externalities (it might be noted that shipping is also a significant contributor to carbon emissions but as an industry has resolved to reduce this amount since 2018 (Acciaro and McKinnon 2020).

### **3.2. Inequality**

It is possible to draw a parallel between Polanyi's disembeddedness and the malaise discerned by authors such as Hines (2000) and Bello (2004), who consider globalization as a form of hothoused creature that has grown, as part of a misguided experiment and become something monstrous and destructive. It is possible to see this occurrence as either an unanticipated product of an attempt to follow the economic logic or else the more or less deliberate attempt

to recreate the world following either the logic of neoliberalism or as a means of creating and recreating hegemonic domination of the USA using tools such as the Bretton Woods institutions and the Washington Consensus. The work of Hines (2000) is an example of the former, with nations showing the desire to outcompete each other leading to beggar thy neighbor zero sum results and the inevitable extirpation of globalization resulting in part from “(i)ncreasing resort to unilateralism and the brazen manipulation of multilateral mechanisms to achieve hegemony by the United States” (Hines 2000: 4).

This strand of thought sees globalization as a deliberate attempt to implant corporations around the world that would negate if not destroy corporations from other countries and the local institutions that might appear to protect them. There are, of course, plenty of precedents for this, as the formation of banana republics indicates (Chapman 2007). These situations provoke inequality. The Vietnamese government’s policy to prepare a nest for the eagles or multinational companies (Hoang 2020) (and also some sparrows) risks provoking such inequality by instituting a dual economic system, with the FDI-fueled international sector lying on top of a much less productive domestic sector. World Bank figures show that Vietnam’s poverty rate is 1.8% of the population and a Gini index of inequality of 35.7, which is a testament to the work that the government has done in attempting to eradicate poverty throughout the country. Poverty is now mostly to be found in more remote provinces and regions where difficult terrain affects the reach of public services. These areas tend to be places where ethnic minority people live.

Firms situate themselves where they can make a profit, mainly in the case of Vietnam through low labor costs. However, the managers and executives of such firms require a standard of living commensurate to their rank and so factories should not be too far from cities and there should be appropriate healthcare, education, retail, and leisure services available. Consequently, successful SEZs tend to crowd together in areas that provide profitability together with standard of living. This in turn promotes internal migration which, despite remittances to the home community, exacerbates

inter-province inequalities. Despite evidence that some migration flows have reversed and remittance flows are multi-directional (Luong 2018), there is still a concentration of movement towards the larger cities for the jobs available.

At a broader level, the Trump trade war against EU countries, China, and numerous other states was indicative of a new form of the conflict that continues the underlying struggle for supremacy. The erasure of local communities and expressions of solidarity are forms of collateral damage in this struggle. Just as the British crown licensed private sector operations such as the East India Company to enact its imperial acquisitions, so has the US government entrusted its corporations, implicitly or explicitly, to perform the same role and to work through transnational rules-giving organizations such as the WTO to fulfil the required tasks. Hines (2000) describes this method of operation in this manner: "... trade rules should be seen for what they are: a grubby set of global guidelines drawn up at the behest of the powerful for the benefit of the powerful" (Hines 2000: 10). It is certainly true that the US has used its position in the WTO to prevent the promotion to office of judges capable of decision-making, thereby rendering the WTO unfit for purpose in its aspect as adjudicator of international trade disputes, leaving corporations with unmerited ability to game the system as they choose. There is a lengthy history of abuses by multinational corporations operating overseas no matter where they might have originated.

These approaches to globalization do not deny the benefits that it might bring along the way. Just as the *Communist Manifesto* (1848) acknowledged the extraordinary and sometimes egregious productivity of capitalism while nevertheless arguing that it was not the final destination of economic evolution, so too do proponents of deglobalization from this perspective acknowledge, sometimes a mite grudgingly, the increases to efficiency and related standards of living brought about by globalization, while also maintaining that it cannot be sustained indefinitely. However, they are quite clear about the need to rebuild at the local level to replace global structures and processes. Bello (2009) specifies an 11-point plan to achieve this, which includes measures to enhance local production, focusing on

quality of life rather than growth and democratizing decisions which are currently made by corporations.

This plan is certainly broad ranging and includes a wide swath of equity issues which would be resisted by powerful forces in the global system and media and political forces would certainly be mobilized to resist it. There is a need to challenge mainstream media discourse about what it is possible to achieve and to focus on facts rather than rhetoric or obfuscation. It is difficult to imagine how this might be successfully achieved without extensive regulation. There will be a need to reassert the importance of local, national, or regional legal bodies as being capable of overriding global institutions. This is problematic in Southeast Asia since its regional organization, ASEAN, has proved itself incapable of providing a coherent response to successive crises, including the expulsion of the Rohingyas, the 2021 coup in Myanmar and the issue of sovereignty in the South China or East Sea. Most ASEAN countries lack technical capacity to negotiate effectively on a bilateral basis and, should any try to do so with regional giants such as China, Japan, or South Korea, they would be likely to be overwhelmed. Vietnam also needs agreement on riverine management with upstream countries, China in particular, which would be better tackled on a multilateral basis and with external support for technical issues. Vietnam has benefited from membership of international and transnational organizations and would be lessened by their absence.

### **3.3. The 15-Minute City Dream**

As the world increasingly becomes urbanized, particularly with respect to the need to add resilience in the context of the intensifying global climate emergency, the focus on localization becomes a focus on the organization of the city. Kern (2020) describes the ways in which the city has been designed, deliberately or not, in favor of men and men's interests. Given that many mundane activities are customarily organized along gendered lines, journeys tend to be different—men drive significant distances from one place to another while women tend to make numerous shorter journeys, zigzagging back and forth between a variety of

commitments (shops, schools, clinics) more or less randomly scattered across the map. One means of improving the prospects of urban localization, therefore, would be to reorganize these local or neighborhood facilities in a more rational manner. However, such reorganizations of cities tend to follow the lead of capital, with local residences and retail businesses having been eliminated to make way for broad carriageways to enable large cars to drive in from the outskirts of the city to central shopping centers and department stores in a more convenient way (cf. Rimmer and Dick 2009). These factors have increasingly come to be seen as detrimental to a happy and productive urban living experience. Carlos Moreno (2019) has become the person most associated with a response to these issues through the creation of the 15-minute city, who explains what is required in the following way:

This means transforming the urban space, which is still highly mono-functional, with central city and its various specialised areas, into polycentric city, based on four major components: proximity, diversity, density and ubiquity, in order to offer this quality of life within short distances, across the six essential urban social functions: living, working, supplying, caring, learning and enjoying (ibid.).

The appeal to this form of a good life is closely linked with reduction of consumption and simplification of lifestyles in various forms, including the application of the sharing economy, in which useful items (e.g. tools) which are occasionally needed in every household but rarely used for long may be jointly owned by community members and borrowed like a book from a public library, as well as greater application of the circular economy, in which more attention is given to recycling and reusing. Smarter city design could also include urban farming schemes, which reconfigure existing urban space uses to challenge food deserts in cities and promote community participation in mutually-useful production. There is already a tendency among at least some consumers to consume food produced in a relatively narrow sphere around their homes and to reject air travel or international tourism for their negative environmental consequences. However, there are lifestyle issues related to such sacrifices which make them less appealing to

many and, consequently, it is helpful to introduce these concepts as a means of supporting existing standards of living. Vietnamese consumers in one study (Figuíé et al. 2019) observed that they trusted local wet or fresh markets because it was convenient to determine freshness, while supermarket food could offer the appearance of freshness through keeping the produce under cold conditions. Vietnam's retail sector, particularly with respect to supermarkets, is currently restricted by limitations on foreign ownership. The memory of famine lives in the memories of the current generation of leaders and there appears to be no rush to imperil existing levels of food security.

It might further be noted that this concept of urban life is quite distinct from the so-called Smart City concept, which ostensibly uses big data in real time to make better resource allocation decisions (e.g. for traffic or power generation and distribution) but which quickly becomes a reason for adopting closed-circuit television systems for surveillance and "crowd control."

### **3.4. Closing the Country**

The decision by a small majority of British voters to leave the European Union (EU) was largely based on racism and xenophobia that were legitimized as a result and these forces are in the process of being used to foment nationalism to the detriment of the country and, indeed, the remaining 27 members of the EU. Nationalism has taken hold in a variety of countries, from Hungary to Turkey to the Philippines. It was given sustenance by the election and presidency of Donald Trump and represents a form of inward-turning deglobalization that challenges political rather than economic structures. Since deglobalization requires cooperation as a core principle, it is antithetical to nationalism. Further, nationalism locks in place national borders (which may be real or imaginary) that have been created for a number of reasons but rarely because of the logic of localized economic systems. Colonization, most obviously, inflicted arbitrary lines across maps with little or no regard for the people living there and their interactions with their own communities and neighboring ones.

As mentioned above, there are issues of confrontation in the East (South China) Sea and riverine management which are causing tension between China and Southeast Asian neighbors, including Vietnam. At a moment when there is a need on all sides for flexibility in discussions and potential negotiation, the coronavirus pandemic led to closed borders and increased tension. In the USA, President Trump was complicit in increasing anti-Asian hatred by blaming China for the origin of the virus (Moynihan and Porumbesco 2020), which was seemingly a new front in his campaign against the country that he also blamed as a creator of a supposed climate change hoax (Wong 2016). Rhetoric was combined with the administration's numerous tariffs imposed on Chinese products (CNBC 2019). The decision taken by the subsequent administration tried to cut the link between GDP and military power by taking steps to ensure that Chinese companies, government-linked or otherwise, will be locked out of crucial future technologies relevant to the projection of hard power worldwide (Tooze 2021). Although diplomacy continues behind closed doors, these needless spats damaged the possibility of constructive talks at a moment when Chinese President Xi Jinping was acting to consolidate his own power and to centralize Chinese political thought around the possibility of Chinese leadership with a vanguard of the Chinese Communist Party (Brown 2018). These barriers have been joined by a physical barrier brought about by the coronavirus pandemic. The Chinese government continued until the beginning of 2023 to commit to the complete eradication of the virus and kept the borders closed. One side-effect of this approach has been, in many countries, the vilification of migrant workers accused of spreading disease recklessly and a general cooling of the welcome for any international visitors. The situation was exacerbated by vaccine hoarding by the richer countries, which has further promoted inequality and made it more likely that further variants will evolve in largely unvaccinated populations. China was able to use this situation to make some diplomatic gains by donation of effective vaccines to poorer countries (Jennings 2021).

Vietnam's relationship with China remains precarious and it does not take much for public sentiment to be roused. The folk

memory of the thousand-year colonization by China makes the issue of territory sensitive and Chinese presence in SEZs has been particularly problematic. It is notable the no instances of China's Belt and Road Initiative overseas infrastructure building campaign have been accepted. However, China is a crucial partner economically both for trade and inward investment. There is now a trend for firms to divest from China on account of the extended COVID lockdowns and possible conflict over Taiwan; some firms might shift production to Vietnam (Kawase 2022). If this does happen at any scale, it could prove a further point of tension.

Where interstate tensions exist or can be fostered, then cross-border links wither, which include but are not restricted to trade. They damage everyone involved through a combination of unfulfilled potential, loss of opportunities, and squandering of human capital. Less developed countries suffer to a greater extent because their chances of rapid economic development are intrinsically connected to assembly and manufacture of goods for export. Developed countries can source these products from many places (or use 3D printing) and retain the principal income-generating activities at the beginnings and ends of value chains within their own borders. Given the actions of many countries in response to current flows of refugees and asylum-seekers and the almost certain hardening of attitudes when the flow of climate emergency refugees increases, it is not unlikely that a number of countries will seek to recreate themselves as fortresses.

Having considered the various forms of and motivations for deglobalization, it is necessary to assess the evidence for whether Vietnam is, indeed, undergoing this process.

#### **IV. The Specter in the Distance**

If deglobalization is a specter to be feared, then what is the evidence that it is actually taking place? This section considers that evidence under various headings according to the eclectic paradigm approach of processual analysis previously discussed. It might be

noted that this analysis takes place at a time of some uncertainty. New variants of the coronavirus might emerge. The rebounding of the global economy is being hindered by sporadic outbreaks of inflation, stimulated by the Russian invasion of Ukraine. There are credible threats to the rule of democracy in the USA. There is a tendency to hope for the best and assume that things will work out well but it is far from certain. For example, on first inspection it appears that Vietnam might be a beneficiary of deglobalization because of divestment from China and relocating economic activities to the south (*The Economist* 2022). Meanwhile, the World Bank (2021) is bullish about the country's prospects through institutional reform and adherence to norms of international trade. However, there are reasons to suspect a fracturing of the current global order which would certainly court disaster and which are discussed in this section.

#### **4.1. International Organizations**

Global climate change, economic slowdowns and coronavirus tensions are all putting pressure on international organizations. This is particularly true in the case of ASEAN, since the organization had been assumed to play a leadership role in response to the coup in Myanmar and incipient civil war there that it is simply not equipped (or willing) to take. Although the region has been reassured by the Biden administration that it remains committed to friendly relations (*Thai PBS World* 2022), its actual performance has been fitful. More will be needed to reassure regional leaders of genuine commitment after the damage of the Trump years, albeit that Trump was popular in Vietnam on the basis that he took a tough line against China.

Economic organizations that might also help to reduce tensions and improve relations have been hampered by continued border closure issues, particularly with respect to China. The RCEP has not been able to reach its potential, even given how early a stage this is for its operation, because of supply chain issues and because transportation into and out of China is complicated by the additional checks China requires as part of the ongoing policy to eradicate the virus. The same phenomenon has also affected bilateral and multilateral free trade agreements (FTAs). Sporting

events such as the Winter Olympics held in China in early 2022 were at first threatened by political boycotts by some western countries for a variety of reasons, including the treatment of the Uyghurs of Xinjiang province, attacks on democracy in Hong Kong, and the high-profile disappearance of the tennis player Peng Shuai. The beneficial effects that might accrue from mutual membership of international organizations are not currently being realized.

#### **4.2. Supply Chains and International Trade**

The Vietnamese government enforced a strict lockdown policy throughout the country and particularly in the two major metropolises from the outset of the pandemic until 2020, which proved to be broadly successful. For months, the claim was made that no one had died from the disease throughout the whole country. However, this policy could not deal with the social pressure required, especially with the emergence of the more contagious omicron variant. Consequently, the disease soon became rampant in the two main cities and other parts of the country. As of July, 2023, official figures reveal 11,614,583 positive cases and 43,206 deaths (Worldometer 2023). International flights were stopped in March 2020. When factories closed, thousands of workers fled to their provincial homes and relative safety. Factories were reopened at partial capacity and many workers lived and slept onsite in the wake of significant losses in garment and footwear exports, among others (Hoang 2021). The partial and delayed reopening meant that the standard understanding of value chains—that they are naturally resilient and will snap back to their usual shape when a temporary impairment is removed—has had to be reevaluated. There have been too many interruptions and their combined problems have sapped the ability of chains to retain their integrity. The blocking of the Suez Canal by the *Ever Vision*, for example, led to a cascading series of effects along the supply chain, sequentially, costing billions of dollars per week, denuding shops of goods and backing up containers in places far from where they were needed (Russon 2021). Vietnam suffered from truck and barge hold-ups in its multimodal logistics system and a shortage of containers for its exports industry (Wallis 2021). Korean corporations announced a

plan to open a container factory in Vietnam which would eventually build 100,000 units annually to help combat the unavailability of containers (Li 2021), which continues to intensify with persistent asymmetric trade. Short and medium-term stopgap measures seem likely to be able to overcome supply chain problems for the moment and the international shipping industry is taking seriously its commitments to reducing carbon emissions. However, it is possible to envisage these measures becoming unsustainable if pressure on the system increases.

#### **4.3. International Relations**

It is a common theme for political scientists to observe that when two whales fight, the shrimps suffer, meaning, that conflict between two large powers will bring negative impacts upon the smaller powers in the vicinity. This would certainly be true should the almost unimaginable occur and China seek to re-incorporate Taiwan into the mainland state then Vietnam would suffer turbulent times. At once, the country and many of its neighbors would have to do something they have been trying to avoid for some time and choose between China and the USA—American money will flow to those who agree with this. Then there will be the fall-out from the fighting, refugees, possible environmental pollution, the destruction of trading patterns, and so forth. It is likely that side-skirmishes will break out over the already-contested islands and islets in the seas between China and Southeast Asia. There will be long-term consequences for such acts. In Vietnam, there will be voices to join in an attack on China. There would likely be social unrest in various dimensions. Much of the country's engagement policy with the world will have been destroyed.

Other conflicts or potential conflicts also have the potential to bring about significant disruptions in the international order. Unfortunately, as democracy comes under increasing stress in western countries, led by the far-right movement in the USA, provoking external conflict will become a more possible and likely response to challenges to political legitimacy or the threat of internal divisions. It will be important for secondary powers to do what they can to shore up existing alliances and find new means of promoting

unity. The ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine threatens to help destroy the current international order and create a Russia-China bloc that would be in effective opposition to the US-Europe bloc. If this were to occur, Vietnam would be placed in a very invidious position.

## **V. Conclusion**

Although deglobalization would be problematic for every country, it would be particularly difficult for Vietnam to manage because of the state policy of engagement with the world, the presence of an extensive diaspora, and the creation of links with societies and economies internationally. A breakdown of the international system would not perhaps represent an existential threat to the country. It would however put so much pressure on it to deal with other countries, particularly China, on a bilateral basis that, combined with an inevitable decline in standards of living, it would be much more likely that the legitimacy of the current political settlement would be questioned. In the absence of an alternative political infrastructure of parties, policies, and discourse, it is difficult to imagine that this would be a peaceful process. If this takes place at a time of international conflict and even open warfare, it is possible to imagine that Vietnam will be drawn into confrontations in the East (South China) Sea and that these will not end well.

The theoretical framework of the double movement provided by Polanyi has been helpful to an extent in explaining the potential for deglobalization. Globalization may certainly be seen as a revolutionary step forward (although, of course, it the most recent of such revolutions rather than the first) and should provoke an inevitable reaction. The benefits of globalization from the perspective of the Vietnamese state have become embedded in the economic model being pursued and the method by which the country is being modernized. Deglobalization would be a serious blow to these state-level policy goals. The areas of investigation employed in this paper selected according to the eclectic approach do demonstrate some application of the double movement. The

initial movement towards globalization that has taken place over 50 or more years is now in the process of being countervailed by a reverse movement. Vietnam as a state has staked its status on continued globalization and so the reverse movement would be a negative outcome. The paper has shown that at least some of these threats are genuine and depend on forces beyond the control of the Vietnamese state.

It is common at this stage to acknowledge methodological weaknesses in the paper and intimate that further research would be able to solve any such shortcomings. It is certainly true that the paper is being written in media res in the hope that it will be able to make some sense of events as they transpire. Davies (2020) has called this approach, at least as he employed it, “real-time sociology” and claimed a lineage through Gramscian conjunctural analysis and the work of Stuart Hall. I do not make these claims for my own work but I am happy to be in some small way to be associated with it.

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