

OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES OF ASEAN IN THE UNITED STATES' FREE AND OPEN INDO -PACIFIC STRATEGY

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Abstract

Purpose of the study: overviewing the significance of ASEAN in the FOIP strategy, analyzing its opportunities and challenges when facing complex changes in the region before providing some strategic implications for Vietnam.

Methodology: in this research, the historical method has been used to present the theories, concepts related to FOIP, ASEAN; the analysis-synthesis method has been used to analyze ASEAN's opportunities and challenges; the case study method has also been used to analyze the case of Vietnam.

Main Findings: The analysis of the background of the matter when pointing out the significance of Southeast Asia than from that, analyzing the current and coming opportunities and challenges of ASEAN, is in the focus of the paper. Besides, as a key factor of ASEAN, a case study of Vietnam is also taken into consideration before proposing some strategic implications for Vietnam to adapt to the new context in the region.

Applications of this study: this study will be a useful reference source for government, researchers and scholars of the international relations field.

Novelty/Originality of this study: In this study, opportunities and challenges of ASEAN, as well as the strategic implications for Vietnam in the new context with the implementation of FOIP are presented comprehensively and completely.

Keywords: ASEAN, Opportunities, Challenges, FOIP, Implication, Vietnam.

INTRODUCTION

Since the APEC Summit in November 2017 in Da Nang (Vietnam), where U.S. President Donald Trump first mentioned the phrase "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" - a concept of a wider Asia, about the confluence of the Indian and Pacific Oceans - which has been mentioned by Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe more than a decade ago, the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) was officially recognized. Accordingly, the U.S., Japan, India, and Australia - the key elements in the strategy have also adopted commitments to secure a free, open region that respects the international law and rule-based order. Besides all the strategic significances of Indo-Pacific to the U.S., physically this region is home to 61% of the world population, home to 7 of the top 15 of U.S. trading partners, home to 15 of the 30 of the world's megacities and it's the region where existing five U.S. Security Treaties (Japan, South Korea, Australia, the Philippines, and Thailand). What else's? This region also contributes 2/3 of global growth with 60% of global GDP. It includes the world top three largest economies (the United States, China, and Japan) and the world current fastest-growing economies (the Philippines, Laos, Cambodia, Burma, Nepal, and India) ([U.S. Department of Defense \(2018\)](#)) and also existing in this region is China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Therefore, the Asia Pacific under Obama administration or currently Indo-Pacific under Trump administration has always been a geo-strategic and geo-economic region for the U.S. In the context when China is increasing its influence in this region through numbers of economic projects and investments with strategic implication, the U.S. would have to pay more attention to this region. Brendon and Ash (2018) introduced confusing concepts about FOIP and how countries from different levels react to FOIP. Brendon and Ash concluded that no matter how FOIP is shaped and implemented, it would greatly affect the region's shaping process. However, in this research, Brendon and Ash didn't analyze the role of ASEAN and how ASEAN would be when FOIP is introduced ([Brendon J. Cannon, Ash Rossiter \(2018\)](#)). Meanwhile, Southeast Asia - the area of strategic significance to any regional and global power, with the existence of ASEAN, is now continuing to be considered the center to enforce and promote FOIP when leaders of U.S., Japan, India, and Australia have repeatedly mentioned phrases like "ASEAN is the heart of the Indo-Pacific region", "ASEAN is the heart of the FOIP strategy" at international Forums, Summits in recent years. Therefore, the introduction of "ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific" (AOIP) ([ASEAN-Thailand Secretariat \(2019\)](#)) on one hand expresses ASEAN's views on FOIP, on the other hand also shows the organization's efforts and determination to maintain the role of a centrally political-economic institution in the region. It can be said that opportunities and benefits for ASEAN and its members are visible when world powers are now recognizing ASEAN's roles in the shaping of world order, in determining the global power race. However, it is undeniable that ASEAN's ability to maintain a central but neutral position will face many challenges, from inside and outside the organization. These challenges will become especially harder for ASEAN when the benefits and risks of its members are conflicting with the whole organization's ones. Besides, Vietnam-as one of ASEAN's most active members, will therefore inevitably be impacted, directly and indirectly. In this context, studying and assessing regional changes as well as the accompanying impacts to timely adjust and launch appropriate policies are what the Vietnamese government should take into consideration.

SOUTHEAST ASIA'S SIGNIFICANCES IN FOIP

Located in the center of Asia, linking the Pacific and Indian Oceans were exiting the Straits of Malacca, the South China Sea..., Southeast Asia certainly occupied such a strategic position that all powers have been striving for influence for years. In other words, Southeast Asia is considered to be the key bridge between the Asia and Europe continents, between Southwest Asia, Middle East, North Africa with Northeast Asia and North America. Therefore, this region plays an important role in regional and global maritime security as well as commercial traffic. Especially in the context that China's recent belligerent moves in the South China Sea which led to escalating tensions, this region has drawn more and more worldwide attention. That's why though there are some certain differences in foreign policy under Obama or Trump's administration, Southeast Asia remains its irreplaceable role ([Ron Huisken. \(2009\)](#)).

Moreover, this region currently is home to more than 650 million people which accounts for 8.6% of the total world population with the median age is 28.8 years – the golden age for economic development ([The Worldometers \(2019\)](#)). Those are the reasons why recently, growth rate and speed in Southeast Asia are very impressive. According to OECD's 2019 overview report ([OECD \(2019\)](#)), real GDP growth in Southeast Asia in 2018 is 5.3% and it is forecast to continue to grow by 5.2% in 2019 - 2023, faster than the rate posted in 2012 - 2016. Therefore, it is believed that this region's economic expansion rates will remain robust with the young labor market even though to some extent, policy gaps, institutional differences...related to potential risks remain. Clearly, with these potentially economic statistics, Southeast Asia will become a very attractive market for larger economies like the U.S., China...to push further and deeper connections with this region.

Besides, Southeast Asia is also home to ASEAN – a regional political-economic institution that is now playing the leading role in multilateral cooperation and partly dominating the power races for ordering the regional architecture. Over fifty-year existence, with the forming of the ASEAN Community which including three main pillars in political-security, economy, and socio-culture; being key element not only in Southeast Asia but also in broader Asia's frameworks and cooperative platforms such as ARF, ADMM or the ADMM+...; ASEAN is believed to be able to exercise voice and influence over the regional shaping order. In 2010, research was carried out by Hidetaka Yoshimatsu and Dennis D. Trinidad examined economic integration and China's influence in Southeast Asia. However, as at the time this study was conducted, the AOIP hasn't been introduced so its forecast about China's moves with ASEAN was different from the current situation. In other words, when ASEAN introduced AOIP, ASEAN has further confirmed its intervention in this region with the existence of FOIP. As a result, for U.S. and FOIP, Southeast Asia or ASEAN will be a decisive factor for its initial emphasis and expansion later ([Hidetaka Yoshimatsu & Dennis D.Trinidad. \(2010\)](#)). In another research made by Donald K. Emmerson, over many years, security, community, and democracy in ASEAN have changed though still big issues. 2017 marked the 50 years of establishment of this organization with many successes but these problems would still need more concerns. Nevertheless, with the formation of the ASEAN Community as well as the globalization process, these issues may be relieved in many different ways ([Donald K. Emmerson \(2005\)](#)).

It is not by accident that since the Cold War, Southeast Asia – a region of small states but has always been the objective of middle and great powers. This was analyzed in the research by Donald S. Zagoria in 2016, in which the connection between the U.S. and the Asia Pacific in post-Cold War was affected by many factors. The author also concluded that in the coming years, this region will be focused more on the U.S. policy while Latin America will keep its role as the backyard in U.S. strategic scheme ([Donald S. Zagoria \(2016\)](#)). For U.S., with the existence of two treaty allies (Thailand and Philippines) as well as other strategic partners, with the location of military bases, with its central position in Trump administration's new strategy – which directly emphasize its importance, Southeast Asia certainly plays a significant role in the implementation as well as advancement of the FOIP. That is to say, Southeast Asia will, on one hand, benefits a lots from the FOIP when the U.S. promote its integration into this region while keeping its “free” and “open”; on the other hand, this region will face noticeable problems when once again, being the mutually strategic target of great powers, specifically here are U.S. and China ([Satoshi Amako. \(2017\)](#)).

In short, so far many kinds of research about FOIP, about ASEAN and its changing roles now have been carried out but a deep analysis on ASEAN's opportunities and challenges hasn't yet been conducted, especially in the context that the U.S. is promoting its FOIP strategy and ASEAN has launched AOIP. In other words, will ASEAN be able to take these advantages and overcome these new challenges while its members are directly or indirectly affected by the U.S., Japan, China, India...which makes these countries find it difficult to keep their consensus and harmony?

METHODOLOGY

As this paper presented some issues in international theory as well as international relations matters, I used a qualitative method to conduct it. That's the reason why I explained in the Methodology part in the Abstract that historical method, analysis-synthesis method (documentary analysis) and case study method, which all belong to the qualitative method, as the three main methods for my study. Therefore, my results are “soft” data, which are the analysis of the opportunities, the forecast about challenges, the implications for Vietnam as one case study here.

DISCUSSION / ANALYSIS

As soon as U.S. President Donald Trump chose Southeast Asia as a place to officially use the term "Free and Open Indo-Pacific", there were many predictions and judgments about this region's prospects with the center are ASEAN. The launch of FOIP after China's "Belt and Road Initiative" (BRI) further affirms Southeast Asia's strategic significance comprehensively, basing on its potential of economic growth, geographical location as well as geopolitics ([Theresa Fallon \(2015\)](#)). In other words, Southeast Asia will continue to be the center of power game and will be the main factor in shaping regional order. In this context, the role of ASEAN - the only political institution so far in the region - is getting more and more attention. Along with AOIP, opportunities and challenges are set for this region, thus, it will be more significant.

Opportunities

The first opportunity which is also one of the biggest benefits is that through AOIP, ASEAN will further affirm its role and position in the region. After more than 50 years of establishment, with a population of over 642 million people, ASEAN is one of the strongest economies, the largest labor force in the world, just after India and China ([The ASEAN Secretariat \(2018\)](#)). In addition to economic potential, changes in international politics along with tensions in security issues in the Indo-Pacific - the region that still hasn't yet have any inclusive political organization - which has made this institution even more conducive to be a leading driver in multilateral initiatives and cooperation. So far, ASEAN has been very successful in maintaining the leadership of the EAS, ARF, ADMM+...which are regional platforms attracting great interest in international relations. Therefore, the AOIP is ASEAN's vision and at the same time delivers an official message of ASEAN to the world, especially with the U.S. and its allies and China about FOIP. In other words, ASEAN is willing to continue to play a central role in the region, continuing to maintain its existing commitments and orienting major countries following international rules and laws, thereby establishing the position of ASEAN in the Indo-Pacific region ([John David Ciorciari. \(2019\)](#)).

The second opportunity of ASEAN is that FOIP together with AOIP will be an important catalyst to further promote the process of building the ASEAN Community, including three pillars: APSC, AEC, and ASCC. Although so far these three communities have initially achieved remarkable results through the quality and effectiveness of cooperation programs, expanding investment opportunities, exchanges and connections but still there are many inherent problems such as the development gaps between countries, certain differences in many aspects from politics, economy to culture, religion. Therefore, the adoption of AOIP is forecasted to link ASEAN member states further, strengthening internal solidarity and unity, aligning national interests with the organization's common interests towards its goal to build an ASEAN with peace, security, stability, and prosperity. It can be said that these are favorable conditions for the ASEAN Community to develop as planned in the ASEAN Community Vision 2025 ([The ASEAN Secretariat \(2015\)](#)). The development and success of the ASEAN Community, on the contrary, will be significant and decisive in strengthening and upgrading ASEAN's position as this will directly prove the fact that ASEAN is a secured, peaceful and stable organization which means a favorable environment to promote multilateral cooperation and diplomacy.

The third also the final opportunity is the "free" and "open" factors will enable ASEAN member states to integrate more deeply and more closely with the larger economies in the region and the world. The fact that ASEAN adopted AOIP, although it does not mean fully support FOIP but has some certain similarities in the view of an open, cooperative, peaceful and prosperous Indo-Pacific ([Srinath Raghavan. \(2013\)](#)). Therefore, in the context that from China's BRI to the US' FOIP Strategy, Japan's Indo-Pacific Strategy, Australian Foreign Policy White Paper, India's Act East Policy or South Korea's New Southern Policy or even Taiwan's New Southbound Policy, has repeatedly emphasized the central role of Southeast Asia, it is predictable that these countries will increase their investments and promote their cooperation networks in this region ([See Seng Tan. \(2019\)](#)). Moreover, along with AOIP, ASEAN has implicitly insisted on continuing its leadership but its neutrality in the region - the factor that will push major powers put more effort in competing for their positions and influences over Southeast Asian countries through investment projects, economic support, cultural-educational exchanges, security-defense cooperation, science-technology advancement... ([Diane Stone. \(2011\)](#)).

Challenges

In addition to the above opportunities, the challenges posed for ASEAN are completely not small when it comes to both internal and external sides.

The first challenge for ASEAN is the possibility of falling into a dilemma. Although ASEAN has adopted AOIP, showing its neutral position and determination to maintain the leading role in the region, this is not easy for a mechanism that is still relatively loose like ASEAN. The ability to maintain a neutral position will always be a huge challenge for ASEAN, especially in the context that major countries are actively competing for dominance. Therefore, on the one hand, if ASEAN maintains neutrality but is passive, it will soon be at risk of being led and dominated. On the other hand, if ASEAN is too active and positive, it will default on one of the two orders that one side - U.S. is central and one side - China is central ([John David Ciorciari. \(2019\)](#)). That is to say, it is the choice between FOIP and BRI because after all, FOIP is the strategy that ASEAN is the center of U.S. in maintaining the inherent international order and on the

opposite - BRI, ASEAN is also the center of China to weaken norms of promoting the U.S.'s interests. ASEAN will, therefore, be at the risk of becoming the main arena of powers like the Cold War ([Allison, Laura. & Taylor, Monique. \(2017\)](#)).

The second challenge may come from within ASEAN itself as the institution still has inherent weaknesses. These weaknesses include differences in institutions, in political interests which make it difficult for member countries to have a common voice in consultations and discussions on security issues - regional politics; gaps in the level of development of countries; diversity and complexity in religion, ethnicity, and institutional restrictions when the ASEAN Way ([ASEAN \(2001\)](#)) is based on consultation and consensus. This is considered as the biggest weakness of ASEAN when this greatly affects ASEAN's decision-making process because all ASEAN members have equal rights and with one member to protest, ASEAN will not be able to make a final decision. For AOIP, although it has been adopted by ASEAN with differences in strategic interests, in the nature and level of relations among ASEAN countries and the major countries, the consensus among member states for addressing problems that will arise is still neglected, especially in the South China Sea's security issues. This will directly affect the internal solidarity – the main element that has made ASEAN's strength and success so far, thereby indirectly affecting ASEAN's position ([Jones, David, M. & Jenne, Nicole. \(2016\)](#)).

The third and also the final challenge is China's response to ASEAN. It's an undeniable fact that China is currently the second economic power, among the countries with the largest labor force in the world. In the ranking list of Global Firepower's military powers in 2019, China is currently ranked third in the world (after the U.S. & Russia) and the second in Asia (after Russia) ([Global Firepower \(2019\)](#)). Thus, with BRI, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and a series of economic projects, with the pace of military modernization and the level of investment in the military budget, the potential of human resources, the ability to research and develop science and technology ...; the influence of China no longer only at the continent level. In other words, the dependence on China especially from Southeast Asian countries, especially in the economic sector, will likely increase ([Timur Dadabaev. \(2018\)](#)). Meanwhile, all the Indo-Pacific concepts of FOIP or the QUAD, despite differences in implementation, are identical because of a new regional order that does not revolve around China, implying to prevent unipolar policy in Asia that China will hold hegemony ([T. Ibragimova .et al. \(2019\)](#)). Therefore, the introduction of AOIP will make China take new moves, strategic adjustments to make appropriate calculations when the region changes. As a result, China's new reactions will certainly have a huge impact on Southeast Asian countries, ASEAN and its centrality.

In summary, ASEAN together with AOIP is forecasted to have many opportunities with many challenges and difficulties when participating in the regional order's shaping process. Thus, ASEAN's ability to take advantage of opportunities and limit challenges in the context of a broader strategy is based on the two core elements of ASEAN's centrality and solidarity, with revision in its mechanism, will be the keys to help ASEAN succeed in the leading role in the region. In other words, the power of ASEAN is the collective strength, the power of solidarity and consensus among the 10 member states. Therefore, the development of an individual nation will directly affect the development of the whole block and vice versa. This requires each member state has different strategic directions but share certain common benefits in the national development goals, following the interests and objectives of the organization.

Strategic implications for Vietnam

As a member of ASEAN, Vietnam can't avoid the influence of FOIP. However, based on the different characteristics of political institutions as well as national strategies, Vietnam is forecasted to contribute to forming FOIP and enforcing AOIP according to its strategic interests.

Firstly, FOIP strategy, as well as AOIP vision both, emphasizes freedom and openness, integration and cooperation, so Vietnam will benefit favorable conditions to establish relationships and expand cooperation with economies inside and outside the region. This will also be very good opportunities for Vietnam to acquire and further develop science and technology, security and defense, thereby directly reinforcing political security and enforcing national foreign policy and indirectly contribute to stabilizing, maintaining regional order according to international norms and laws. Therefore, Vietnam needs to be more proactive to make the most of strategic opportunities through promoting trade liberalization and investment, strengthening maritime security cooperation, actively participating in forums, multilateral summits to enhance its position in the region.

Secondly, FOIP is essentially the U.S.'s strategy to counterbalance China's BRI. Although ASEAN has adopted AOIP to affirm its centrality and neutrality, the risk of ASEAN to become central in the power races and influence as well as the risk of Vietnam and its member states for becoming an object to be dominated, manipulated and influenced by great powers that mainly on one side is the U.S. and its allies, on the one side is China; is very likely to happen. Therefore, Vietnam needs to be very clear and transparent in bilateral and multilateral relations as well as take initiative in making policies and strategies to promptly react to complicated changes in the region ([Rumi Aoyama. \(2016\)](#)).

Thirdly, Vietnam is well aware that national security and peace only guaranteed when it is associated with the security and peace of the organization and the region. Thus, as an active member of ASEAN, Vietnam should strive to contribute to the process of building the ASEAN Community, strengthening exchanges and cooperation with member countries to

minimize barriers, differences, thereby contributing to strengthening solidarity, enhancing ASEAN's strength, helping ASEAN to be a key driver in solving regional issues. As the ASEAN Chair in 2020, Vietnam is expected to continue to inherit the achievements and further promote intra-regional cooperation, enhance ASEAN's position and promote its strength when facing profound impacts of strategic competition and internal and external fluctuations.

Finally, for the relationship with China, the BRI initiative is highly dominant to coastal countries in Southeast Asia, in which Vietnam is the key factor, therefore Viet Nam needs to make the most of the benefits provided by BRI while still ensure national maritime security and control China's challenging legal actions, asserting its view on the South China Sea issues in a manner that respects the principles and norms of international law and regulations, particularly the 1982 Convention (UNCLOS) ([United Nation \(1982\)](#)). Besides, Vietnam will continue to invest in military development, especially strengthening maritime security cooperation with countries to indirectly put pressure on China, limit dominant ambitions and expansion of this second Asian military power.

In short, Southeast Asia in particular and Indo-Pacific in general, always bear a lot of potential benefits and complex conflicts. Cooperation and competition, cohesion and confrontation, opportunities and challenges always exist here in addition to the threats of traditional and non-traditional security, terrorism, environmental issues... So as an active member and a strategic partner of many countries regionally and globally, Vietnam will also have to make adjustments in foreign policy and a national strategy to actively promote opportunities and effectively limit difficulties and challenges in new situations.

CONCLUSION

In general, ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific in addition to presenting ASEAN's views on Indo-Pacific also emphasizes the development and connectivity, maritime infrastructure and economic cooperation. Besides, AOIP can also be viewed as an affirmation of ASEAN's determination to play a central role to orient the powers involved in the zero-sum game following the direction of multilateral diplomacy. Moreover, through AOIP, ASEAN has also sent a message about an ASEAN that will continue to be at the center of cooperation and dialogue rather than being at the center of the competition and regional powers race. That is to say, ASEAN needs to take the lead in shaping and developing regional order, aiming for stability, peace, and prosperity of Southeast Asia in particular and Indo-Pacific in general.

It can be said that in the current economic and strategic context, ASEAN will remain an important factor in all aspects. With that advantage, ASEAN will surely have more and more opportunities to develop its economy, culture, and society and enhance its political position in international relations. However, it is because of the important role and strategic position of Southeast Asia that ASEAN will face many more challenges when on one hand have to reinforce and improve its internal mechanism, maintain the strength of the block; on the other hand, is confronted with a series of extraneous pressure. Therefore, although there are still differences in ASEAN members themselves on the Indo-Pacific perspective, what ASEAN needs to do is to maintain consensus and cohesion among its members, ensuring the common denominator of interests in ASEAN to enhance the leadership and orientation of regional structure and order.

At the 17th Shangri-La Dialogue took place in Singapore in June 2018, Vietnam's Defense Minister Ngo Xuan Lich affirmed: "Security and freedom can only be guaranteed by the independence of each the country with any power and by the voluntary cooperation of each country with all other great powers". This has also partly reflected Vietnam's perspective in the current context when conflicts and competition in the region are on the rise. In other words, Vietnam always strives to maintain freedom, peace, and security in the region, actively expanding and strengthening cooperation in many fields, actively ensuring national security and regional security by respecting and enforcing international norms and laws. As an active member in ASEAN and will hold the ASEAN Chair 2020, Vietnam promises to continue to contribute to promoting the development of the organization, together with ASEAN to capture and make the most of opportunities, ease and overcome challenges, thereby building a Southeast Asia region or an Indo-Pacific region of freedom, openness, peace, and prosperity.

LIMITATION AND STUDY FORWARD

Movements in international relations in recent years have been very complicated and unpredictable due to the conflict situation in the Indo-Pacific region as well as in the world. Besides traditionally major countries like the USA, Japan, China, Russia...new coming ones from individual nations like India, South Korea or organizations like ASEAN are also taking part in dominating the regional and global order. If under President Obama administration, Asia-Pacific is the center of focus then under President Trump administration, it has been broadened to Indo-Pacific where the roles of India, of ASEAN, have been more highlighted. Even though the nature of Asia Pivot Strategy or the Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy may, to some extent, are the same; key elements in this play game are different, the approach in dealing with the relationship with China is different and even the roles of observers are different. In this paper, when discussing about the opportunities and challenges of ASEAN, although the author has already considered both the internal factors and external factors, both from the current to the future context; things may still change regardless of any predictions, which means these opportunities and challenges may change which can be seen as limitation of this study. However, this will open up further discussion about this matter in the next coming years when changes are clearly and other different visions are visible. In that context, Vietnam, of course, will have to consider these changes and be

actively involved in the game. It's the nature of international politics when every nation has its strategy and policies that when the situation changes, it will change, not only for its national interest but also for a better adaption to the new situation. Of course beside national interest, any nation has to aim for the globally mutual peace, prosperity, security as well as sustainable development. Therefore, the international rules and norms will still an important framework to instruct all nations' developmental orientation, both economically and politically.

In short, the scope of further research about the opportunities and challenges of ASEAN in FOIP strategy as well as strategic implications for Vietnam may still base on original theories related to FOIP and ASEAN but it can develop to further deeper to specific opportunities and challenges for each ASEAN member countries because these countries with differences in political institution, economic development level or religion background will face different problems which lead to their diverse reactions. Besides, in the next coming years, after being implemented, the FOIP strategy's effectiveness able to be examined so further research can also look at this strategy from different perspectives, from large to middle and small countries' levels. Similarly, whether the AOIP can be fully recognized and practiced among ASEAN member countries or not, why and why not, is also another direction for further research as well.

IMPLICATIONS

Natures, the movement, the development, the prospect of international relation issues are different under different perspectives. Therefore, although there may be many studies about one matter to some extent, they are still different with different values. For my study, I have analyzed matters of ASEAN in the context that FOIP has been introduced, I pointed out its opportunities and challenges before providing specific four strategic implications for Vietnam which I believed they haven't been studied yet and they're different with all the implication that other authors have suggested until now. So these findings of my study will provide another look at this matter, which helps scholars, researchers, students...have more choices when approaching issues related to this matter. So I believe this is the way how the findings of my study will add value to the respective area of research which is international politics here.

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