



## Regular Article

# From isolation to middle power: Vietnam's sports diplomacy strategy through the Southeast Asian games

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## ABSTRACT

This study examines Vietnam's strategic deployment of sports diplomacy through the Southeast Asian Games (SEA Games) to facilitate its geopolitical transformation from regional isolation to middle power status. Drawing on Joseph Nye's soft power theoretical framework, the research traces Vietnam's SEA Games participation across four distinct historical phases: (i) Cold War participation as the Republic of Vietnam (1959-1975); (ii) post-unification absence during political isolation (1975-1989); (iii) strategic re-entry and gradual integration (1989-2003); and (iv) emergence as a regional sporting power (2004-present). Through historical analysis and inductive methodology, the study identifies four strategic pillars characterizing Vietnam's approach: (i) cultural integration through traditional sports; (ii) systematic credibility-building through improved performance; (iii) strategic exploitation of hosting opportunities for nation branding; and (iv) using sports as diplomatic bridges for relationship-building. The findings demonstrate what this study terms the "dialectical" relationship between sports and politics, illustrating how sporting engagement both reflects and actively shapes diplomatic relations and geopolitical standing. Vietnam's transformation from absent participant to regional sporting leader temporally correlates with its broader diplomatic evolution toward recognized middle power influence in Southeast Asia. This research addresses a critical gap in understanding how emerging middle powers in non-Western contexts deploy soft power through regional sporting platforms, offering applicable insights for other nations seeking to enhance regional influence through sports diplomacy strategies.

## 1. Introduction

Sports diplomacy has emerged as a critical soft power tool in contemporary international relations, enabling nations to cultivate relationships and project influence without coercion (Lee & Krieger, 2024, p. 641; Murray, 2020). This phenomenon holds particular significance for middle powers—countries with important regional standing—who strategically leverage intangible resources such as culture and sporting achievements to enhance their international standing (Kobierecki, 2017; Liston & Maguire, 2024). While extensive scholarship examines sports diplomacy among superpowers and Western powers (Kuang, 2024; Defrance & Chamot, 2008; Dichter, 2024), a significant research gap remains regarding how emerging middle powers in Southeast Asia deploy regional sporting events as diplomatic instruments.

This gap is particularly evident within ASEAN, where the biennial Southeast Asian Games (SEA Games) function as both athletic

competitions and platforms for diplomatic signaling and nation branding (Creak & Trotier, 2024, p. 2). Despite the SEA Games' six-decade history and overtly political dimensions, systematic scholarly analysis of how ASEAN member states utilize this platform remains limited. Recent scholarship has begun addressing this deficit (Abe, 2024; Creak, 2011; Creak & Trotier, 2024; Jones & Theerawong, 2021). However, no comprehensive study analyzes Vietnam's sports diplomacy deployment across its complex historical trajectory—an emerging middle power gaining international recognition in Southeast Asia (Do, 2022; Kiet et al., 2025a, 2025b).

Vietnam presents a particularly compelling case for examining middle power sports diplomacy. The nation's transformation—from Cold War division and post-1975 isolation to middle power status following the 1986 "Doi Moi" reforms—offers unique insights into how sporting engagement can both reflect and facilitate diplomatic repositioning. Vietnam's evolving relationship with the SEA Games mirrors

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this transformation through four distinct phases: initial participation by the Republic of Vietnam (1959-1975), complete absence during isolation (1975-1989), strategic re-engagement (1989-2003), and emergence as a regional sporting power (2004-present). Notably, returning to the 15th SEA Games in 1989—coinciding with military withdrawal from Cambodia—constituted a deliberate diplomatic signal of reconciliation and regional reintegration.

This study addresses two interrelated research questions. First, how has the relationship between SEA Games participation and Vietnam's geopolitical transformation unfolded across four historical phases (1959-2023)? Second, what strategic pillars has Vietnam deployed in sports diplomacy to enhance soft power and regional influence?

This study makes three distinct contributions: (i) providing the first comprehensive analysis of Vietnam's sports diplomacy strategy; (ii) demonstrating the dialectical relationship between sports and politics; and (iii) offering insights for other emerging middle powers seeking to enhance regional influence through soft power strategies.

## 2. Literature review and theoretical framework

### 2.1. Sports diplomacy, soft power, and the sports-politics nexus

Sports diplomacy is increasingly recognized academically as a distinctive diplomatic modality, enabling nations to build bilateral and multilateral relationships, enhance cross-sector cooperation, and project soft power in an era where traditional hard power tools—military force and economic coercion—often prove counterproductive for lasting influence (Grix & Brannagan, 2024; Murray & Pigman, 2014; Grix & Brannagan, 2016). Lee and Krieger (2024, pp. 641-642) and Postlethwaite et al. (2022, p. 362) define “sports diplomacy” as using sporting activities as a diplomatic tool to promote international relations, build mutual understanding between peoples and nations, and create favorable environments for peaceful resolution of complex political issues. Meanwhile, Murray (2012, p. 581) defines “sports diplomacy” as “using athletes and sporting events to attract, inform, and create favorable images among foreign publics and organizations to shape their perceptions in ways more beneficial for achieving government foreign policy objectives.” Additionally, (Gargalianos, 2025, p. 167) defines sports diplomacy as “the unique power of sports to bring people, nations, and communities closer together through shared love of physical activities.” From these prominent scholars’ definitions, sports diplomacy functions to transcend language, cultural, and ideological barriers while creating positive emotions and facilitating people-to-people connections.

The concept of “soft power,” introduced by scholar Joseph Nye in his 1990 book “Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power,” refers to “the ability to shape others’ preferences through attraction and persuasion rather than coercion or payment” (Nye, 2008, p. 94). Subsequently, Joseph Nye refined this framework in his 2004 book “Soft power: The means to success in world politics,” identifying three core sources of soft power: (i) culture possessing universal appeal; (ii) political values demonstrated consistently through domestic governance and foreign policy; and (iii) foreign policy viewed by international audiences as legitimate and morally defensible. Many scholars argue that the fundamental difference between soft power and hard power lies in their mechanisms of influence: while hard power operates through “coercion via military force or economic incentives” (Wilson, 2008), soft power operates through “attraction, persuasion, and creating voluntary cooperation” (Simons, 2021).

Understanding sports diplomacy requires recognizing what this study terms the “dialectical” relationship between sports and politics—a dynamic, bidirectional interaction where each domain simultaneously reflects and actively transforms the other. Historical cases illustrate this nexus: the 1971 US-China ping-pong diplomacy facilitated Cold War rapprochement (Itoh, 2011), while Olympic boycotts (1980, 1984) and the 2022 Beijing diplomatic boycott demonstrated sport's role in

geopolitical competition (Sarantakes, 2009; Kuang, 2024). This dialectical relationship manifests through three fundamental dimensions. First, sports embody an inherent paradox—conceptualized as apolitical yet operating as powerful vehicles for political expression and national identity construction (Kleiber, 1983). This contradiction is sports diplomacy's source of effectiveness: nations convey political messages through the relatively “safe” medium of sporting competition (Gemalmaz, 2024). Second, sports and politics exist in bidirectional dependency. Political decisions shape sporting landscapes through participation eligibility, resource allocation, and legal frameworks (Lee & Krieger, 2024). South Africa's isolation during apartheid (1964-1991) exemplifies how geopolitical tensions manifest through sporting exclusion (Niefertagdien, 2025). Conversely, sporting achievements generate political capital—China's 2008 Beijing Olympics demonstrated how state investment in sports serves broader objectives of signaling “national rejuvenation” and modernization (Giulianotti, 2015, p. 287). Third, sustained interaction creates qualitative transformations in both domains (Lebed, 2022, p. 589). Political objectives drive sports investment, creating achievements that generate diplomatic opportunities and reshape international perceptions through self-reinforcing cycles. Unlike linear causal models viewing sports as merely reflecting political conditions, this perspective recognizes sports as both shaped by and capable of reshaping political contexts—essential for analyzing how middle powers like Vietnam strategically leverage sports for diplomatic transformation.

In the contemporary globalization context, sports diplomacy emerges as a particularly prominent soft power tool for several interconnected reasons. First, sports possess global appeal, transcending barriers that often impede other forms of diplomatic exchange—including language differences, cultural disparities, and ideological divisions (Murray, 2020). Second, sporting achievements provide tangible, internationally comparable evidence of national capacity, creating what Brannagan et al. (2025) describe as “credibility signals” regarding a nation's developmental trajectory and organizational competence. Third, major sporting events create concentrated opportunities for nation branding to simultaneous domestic and international audiences, operating as “mega-events” with significant media exposure and diplomatic visibility (Storm & Jakobsen, 2019, p. 163). Fourth, sports provide relatively neutral platforms for interaction between nations experiencing political tensions, enabling dialogue and relationship maintenance without explicit political concessions or ideological compromise (Dichter, 2024).

Emerging scholarship on middle power sports diplomacy has begun examining how nations beyond superpower status leverage sporting engagement for diplomatic objectives. Grix and Lee (2013) pioneered this analysis by examining how emerging powers deploy major sporting events to signal international emergence, enhance prestige, and reshape international perceptions. Subsequent studies have explored diverse manifestations: South Korea's strategic use of the 1988 Seoul Olympics to normalize diplomatic relations with socialist nations lacking formal relations (Pardo, 2022); or Thailand's soft power enhancement through Muay Thai diplomacy (Jones & Theerawong, 2021). This literature demonstrates that middle powers can effectively use sports diplomacy to make “strong impressions” in international relations.

However, a significant gap remains regarding sustainable sports diplomacy within regional systems, contrasting with hosting a single major event. While hosting Olympics or FIFA World Cups attracts deep scholarly attention, systematic participation in regional sporting platforms—such as ASEAN's SEA Games, South America's Pan American Games, or Africa's All-Africa Games—remains understudied. Creak and Trotier's (2024) work on sports and Southeast Asian regionalism through the SEA Games is an important exception, demonstrating that regional games operate as “laboratories for regional identity” and “barometers of diplomatic relations.” Building on this foundation, the current study examines how Vietnam has strategically engaged the SEA Games system over six decades, providing insights into middle power sports diplomacy

that extend beyond spectacular but isolated mega-events to include sustained, systematic regional engagement.

2.2. Conceptual Framework: four strategic pillars in sports diplomacy

Building on Nye's (2004) three-pillar soft power theoretical framework—culture, political values, and foreign policy—this study analyzes four strategic pillars characterizing Vietnam's sports diplomacy, operationalizing abstract theoretical concepts into empirically observable phenomena suitable for qualitative analysis (see Fig. 1).

First, cultural resources: Following Nye's (2004, p. 11) emphasis on "culture with global appeal" as a soft power foundation, this study examines how Vietnam strategically leverages distinctive national identity elements—including traditional martial arts (Vovinam, Wushu), cultural values emphasizing resilience and community spirit, and historical narratives of anti-Western colonial struggle in the 20th century—to create a recognizable "sports brand" capable of attracting international attention and admiration.

Second, image transformation and influence expansion: Soft power ultimately aims at "reshaping international perceptions and expanding influence" (Nye, 2008). This study tracks Vietnam's sporting trajectory from "regional newcomer" (1989) to "competitive participant" (1990s-2000s) to "regional leader" (2020s), analyzing how systematic performance and improved organizational capacity correlate with changes in Vietnam's regional standing.

Third, political values and credibility: Nye (2004, p. 61) argues that "effective soft power requires credibility demonstrated through consistent adherence to publicly declared values." This study examines how Vietnam's approach to hosting SEA Games—emphasizing organizational professionalism, competitive fairness, and sportsmanship rather than maximizing medals through home advantage exploitation—potentially builds international trust and credibility.

Finally, foreign policy alignment: Sports diplomacy cannot operate effectively in isolation but must integrate with broader foreign policy objectives to create synergistic effects (Murray & Pigman, 2014). This study analyzes how Vietnam's sporting engagement reflects the "diversification and multilateralization" foreign policy doctrine articulated after the 1986 Doi Moi reforms, viewing sports cooperation as one mechanism (among many) for consolidating bilateral relationships with ASEAN members and expressing regional "leadership" aspirations.

3. Methodology

This study employs historical analysis to interpret Vietnam's SEA Games participation across four distinct phases: (1) Cold War participation as the Republic of Vietnam (1959-1975); (2) post-unification

absence during political isolation (1975-1989); (3) re-entry and gradual integration (1989-2003); and (4) regional sporting power (2004-present). This periodization reflects major geopolitical shifts in Southeast Asia alongside Vietnam's diplomatic transformation from "confrontation" to "integration."

This study applies inductive methodology to construct the four-pillar strategic framework from empirical data. Unlike deductive approaches that test hypotheses from existing theory, inductive methodology allows patterns to emerge naturally from systematic data analysis. The inductive process was implemented through three steps: (i) systematically collecting and analyzing secondary sources including policy statements from Communist Party congresses, government reports, Vietnamese and regional media, scholarly publications, and official SEA Games records; (ii) identifying recurring themes through careful data coding, including emphasis on nationally distinctive sports, systematic performance improvement, exploitation of hosting opportunities, and sports as diplomatic reconciliation vehicles; and (iii) synthesizing these empirical themes into four strategic pillars, connecting them with Nye's soft power framework to create an integrated analytical model.

This study acknowledges several limitations. First, reliance on secondary sources enables systematic examination but cannot precisely measure soft power impact or establish clear causal connections. As Henne (2022) notes, soft power remains "notoriously difficult to operationalize and measure." Therefore, this study focuses on documenting Vietnam's strategic intentions and observable actions. Second, this single case study struggles to assert causal relationships due to numerous intertwined factors—economic growth, effective COVID-19 management, strategic diplomacy, and geopolitical positioning. Sporting success is one contributing factor among many. Therefore, this study views sports diplomacy as one contributing factor to comprehensive national strategy rather than asserting singular explanatory power.

4. Results

4.1. Vietnam's historical trajectory of SEA games participation: from isolation to regional integration (1959-2023)

The Southeast Asian Games—established in 1958 as the Southeast Asian Peninsula Games (SEAP Games) and renamed in 1977 after ASEAN expansion—represents Southeast Asia's premier sporting event, held biennially with participation from current and future ASEAN member states. Beyond sporting functions, the SEA Games also serves as a "barometer" of regional relations (Creak, 2017), with participation patterns revealing underlying political dynamics among Southeast Asian nations and providing neutral platforms for diplomatic signals during bilateral tensions.

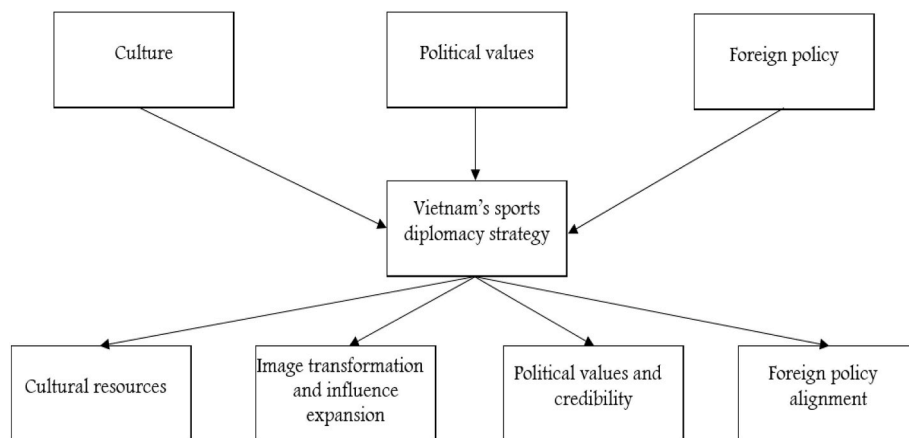


Fig. 1. Conceptual Framework for Vietnam's Sports Diplomacy Strategy Sources: The authors build on Nye (2004).

During the initial phase (1959-1975), the Republic of Vietnam (also called South Vietnam) participated as a founding member of the SEAP Games Federation, maintaining consistent participation from the inaugural Bangkok Games (1959) through the seventh Singapore Games (1973). This participation served strategic diplomatic objectives beyond sporting competition: consolidating the Republic of Vietnam's integration with regional allies sharing capitalist economic orientation and opposing communist expansion during the Cold War in Southeast Asia (Creak & Trotier, 2024, pp. 5-6). Founding members—Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, Burma, and the Philippines—remained primarily Western-aligned with anti-“communist” ideology or significant US influence during the 1950s-1970s, creating a relatively favorable geopolitical environment for the Republic of Vietnam's regional participation (Vinh, 2022). This explains why the Democratic Republic of Vietnam's (also called North Vietnam) athletic delegation was not invited to SEAP Games participation due to anti-communist hostility, particularly from Thailand (Creak & Trotier, 2024, pp. 7-8). Sporting participation created opportunities for diplomatic interaction, cultural exchange, and bilateral relationship-building outside formal political channels, supplementing broader alliance structures including the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO). This phase demonstrates the close connection between Cold War geopolitics and regional sporting structures, where sporting participation reinforced broader ideological alignment and alliance networks.

Following national reunification on April 30, 1975, and establishment of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam on July 2, 1976, Vietnam experienced fourteen years of absence from the SEA Games (1975-1989) (Creak & Trotier, 2024, p. 8). This exclusion resulted from converging factors causing Vietnam's diplomatic and economic isolation from the broader regional community. First, urgent post-war reconstruction needs consumed virtually all available national resources. The war caused massive human and material damage: approximately 3-4 million casualties, systematically destroyed infrastructure, widespread agricultural land contamination, and civilian displacement (People's Army Newspaper, 2024). Second, Vietnam's adoption of socialist development models and close Soviet alignment triggered comprehensive economic sanctions from the United States and Western allies (Path, 2020). The US embargo, imposed in 1975 and not lifted until 1994, severely restricted Vietnam's access to capital, technology, and international markets (Freeman, 1993). ASEAN, established in 1967 and significantly influenced by Western powers, maintained anti-communist attitudes and frequently hostile stances toward unified Vietnam (Frost, 1990). Although Vietnam established formal diplomatic relations with ASEAN's five founding members in 1975-1976, bilateral relations remained tense and characterized by mutual suspicion throughout this period.

Most critically, Vietnam's military intervention in Cambodia in December 1978—overthrowing the genocidal Khmer Rouge regime and establishing the People's Republic of Kampuchea—was the most serious factor causing regional isolation. While the Khmer Rouge caused genocidal violence resulting in approximately 1.7 million Cambodian deaths, representing one-fifth of the nation's population (Kiernan, 2025, p. 163), this regime maintained international recognition and support from key powers including China and tacit Western backing as part of “containment” strategy against communism (Oeur, 2025). Thailand played a particularly important role, permitting and facilitating Khmer Rouge operations from Thai territory to prevent Vietnamese military presence near Thailand's border and maintain Cambodia as a “buffer” state (Turley, 1987, pp. 149-150). China responded to Vietnam's intervention with a military attack to “teach Vietnam a lesson” in February-March 1979, demonstrating Beijing's willingness to use force to protect strategic interests (Thayer, 2010). ASEAN responded with unified condemnation, pursuing diplomatic efforts to isolate Vietnam internationally and supporting continued recognition of Cambodia's seat for a coalition government including the Khmer Rouge at the United Nations (Creak & Trotier, 2024, pp. 7-8). This prolonged 14-year absence illustrates the negative aspect of the “dialectical” relationship between

sports and politics: severe deterioration in political relations directly causes sporting exclusion, as sporting participation requires minimum diplomatic acceptance thresholds.

Vietnam's return at the 15th SEA Games in Kuala Lumpur (August 20-31, 1989) marked a critical diplomatic milestone, occurring simultaneously with Vietnam's announcement of complete military withdrawal from Cambodia in September 1989. This timing reflects a deliberate strategic signal regarding peaceful intentions, regional reconciliation, and readiness to normalize relations (Nhan Dan Newspaper, 2023). Vietnam's reintegration into regional sports paralleled broader diplomatic transformation initiated by “Doi Moi” policies adopted at the 6th Vietnamese Communist Party Congress in December 1986, fundamentally reorienting Vietnam's foreign policy toward “diversification and multilateralization” (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2011, p. 70), rather than focusing solely on Soviet and communist bloc alignment as before (Thayer, 2018). Vietnam's decision to withdraw from Cambodia and pursue regional reintegration reflected calculations that the “new Cambodian state had stabilized and continued military presence would bear unsustainable economic costs, hindering normalization with ASEAN and Western powers,” and maintaining isolation severely limited developmental prospects after implementing “Doi Moi” reforms (Kiernan, 1992). ASEAN's acceptance of Vietnam's SEA Games participation demonstrated goodwill supporting reintegration after prolonged isolation, reflecting declining support for confrontational policies toward communist states, recognition that Vietnamese withdrawal created cooperation opportunities, and broader post-Cold War transformations reducing ideological barriers (Frost, 1990). Sporting reintegration created a relatively low-risk platform for testing normalized relationships before more significant diplomatic commitments, facilitating subsequent critical milestones: Vietnam's formal ASEAN membership and normalization with the United States both in 1995 (Creak & Trotier, 2024, p. 8).

Table 1 demonstrates Vietnam's sporting performance after its 1989 return, showing systematic capacity development correlating with broader socioeconomic progress. At the 15th SEA Games (1989), Vietnam ranked seventh with only 3 gold medals—reflecting fourteen years without international competition and limited sporting infrastructure (Ngoc, 2023b). Performance gradually improved throughout the 1990s: 7 gold medals (1991), 9 gold medals (1993), 10 gold medals (1995), and a significant breakthrough to 35 gold medals and fifth place (1997). This upward trajectory continued and accelerated during 2003-2023, with Vietnam first achieving first place in 2003 with 158 gold medals and consistently ranking among the top three regional sporting powers during this period. The pinnacle was at the 31st SEA Games in Hanoi

**Table 1**  
Vietnam's performance at SEA games (1989-2023).

Year	Games	Host Country	Gold Medals	Overall Ranking
1989	15th SEA Games	Malaysia	3	7
1991	16th SEA Games	Philippines	7	7
1993	17th SEA Games	Singapore	9	6
1995	18th SEA Games	Thailand	10	6
1997	19th SEA Games	Indonesia	35	5
1999	20th SEA Games	Brunei	17	6
2001	21st SEA Games	Malaysia	33	4
2003	22nd SEA Games	Vietnam	158	1
2005	23rd SEA Games	Philippines	71	3
2007	24th SEA Games	Thailand	64	3
2009	25th SEA Games	Laos	83	2
2011	26th SEA Games	Indonesia	96	3
2013	27th SEA Games	Myanmar	73	3
2015	28th SEA Games	Singapore	73	3
2017	29th SEA Games	Malaysia	58	3
2019	30th SEA Games	Philippines	98	2
2022	31st SEA Games	Vietnam	205	1
2023	32nd SEA Games	Cambodia	136	1

**Source:** Compiled by authors from Ngoc (2023b), Official SEA Games Federation Statistics, Lam (2022), Vietnam General Department of Sports records

(May 12-23, 2022), where Vietnam topped the table with 205 gold medals—more than double Thailand's 92 gold medals in second place, breaking Indonesia's previous record of 194 gold medals (Ngoc, 2023b). Vietnam continued this dominance at the 32nd SEA Games in Phnom Penh with 136 gold medals versus Thailand's 108, confirming that 2022's achievement reflected sustainable sporting capacity rather than “home advantage” often notorious in SEA Games competitions.

Vietnam's first hosting of the 22nd SEA Games (2003) marked a symbolic turning point toward strong regional integration (Creak & Trotter, 2024, p. 14), with subsequent hosting of the 31st SEA Games (2022) demonstrating enhanced capacity since implementing “Doi Moi” policies and integrating into the Southeast Asian community. This period witnessed Vietnam's transformation from a nation with “modest” sporting achievements to a regional sporting power, paralleling broader economic and diplomatic development toward recognized middle power status within ASEAN and Southeast Asia. Vietnam's post-unification SEA Games trajectory from complete absence (1975-1989) to participation (1989-2003) to regional sporting power (2004-present) reflects the nation's broader diplomatic evolution from regional isolation to ASEAN membership to emerging middle power status in Southeast Asia. This progression illustrates the “dialectical” relationship between sports and politics: political decisions facilitate sporting participation, enabling diplomatic normalization, allowing expanded sporting investment, creating achievements enhancing Vietnam's regional prestige, thereby generating influence opportunities. This dynamic, mutually reinforcing cycle demonstrates how middle powers can strategically leverage sports to accelerate diplomatic transformation and regional repositioning.

#### 4.2. Vietnam's sports diplomacy: strategy and implementation practices

Vietnam has systematically endeavored to transform sporting achievements into diplomatic influence through four integrated strategic pillars. This framework extends beyond conventional sports diplomacy—which typically emphasizes international goodwill and people-to-people exchange—to encompass deliberate soft power cultivation aligned with foreign policy objectives.

##### 4.2.1. Cultural integration through traditional sports

Vietnam strategically invests in sports combining international competitiveness with distinctive national cultural identity—most notably through Vovinam martial arts. Vovinam—a Vietnamese martial art created by Nguyen Loc in 1938, emphasizing the philosophy of “harmonious balance between hard and soft”—exemplifies cultural integration strategy (Vietnam Sports Administration, 2023). Vietnam successfully advocated including Vovinam as an official competitive sport at the 26th and 27th SEA Games, subsequently “returning” at both the most recent 31st and 32nd SEA Games (Lao Dong Newspaper, 2024), providing competitive advantage while offering platforms for disseminating cultural narratives. Each Vovinam competition implicitly introduces international audiences to Vietnamese philosophy, historical narratives of national wars, post-war resilience, and cultural values—engaging participants through sporting activity rather than cultural programs or overt propaganda. Vietnam embeds cultural content within legitimate international sporting frameworks, and this martial art now exists in over 70 countries/territories worldwide, with approximately 2.5 million practitioners (Luc, 2023). Athletes from Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia, and other ASEAN countries training Vovinam for SEA Games competition potentially become “inadvertent” cultural ambassadors, experiencing and potentially conveying Vietnamese cultural values to domestic and international audiences through sporting networks.

Beyond Vovinam, Vietnam has invested significantly in Wushu (Chinese martial arts)—a sport where Vietnam consistently achieves SEA Games success and even gains international recognition beyond Southeast Asia, particularly through athletes like Nguyen Thuy Hien, Dang Tran Phuong Nhi, Nguyen Thi Thu Thuy, and Ngo Thi Phuong Nga

(Quan, 2023). While Wushu's Chinese origins might seemingly undermine claims of reflecting distinctively Vietnamese culture, Vietnamese Wushu coaching styles and training philosophies reportedly “integrate Vietnamese martial traditions,” creating hybrid forms distinguishing Vietnamese practitioners from purely Chinese methods (Vietnam Sports Administration, 2023). This suggests cultural adaptation rather than mere adoption.

This cultural integration strategy has several limitations. First, Vovinam remains regionally confined with minimal global recognition compared to recognized Asian martial arts (judo, taekwondo, karate with Olympic status). Vovinam's SEA Games presence depends on Vietnamese hosting and advocacy; other ASEAN hosts inconsistently include Vovinam, limiting institutionalization. A typical example is the 33rd SEA Games occurring in late 2025, where host Thailand excluded Vovinam for “technical” reasons despite Vietnam's repeated appeals (Lao Dong Newspaper, 2024). Second, competitive advantages created through including culturally specific sports in host nations' Games—while legitimate under SEA Games procedures—risk appearing self-serving if overemphasized, potentially causing resentment rather than admiration among regional competitors. Therefore, Vietnam's credibility as a regional sporting power ultimately depends on demonstrating excellence in internationally standardized competitive sports (athletics, swimming, team sports) rather than primarily excelling in culturally specific sports where home advantage or subjective judging may influence outcomes. Thus, the cultural integration pillar works best as a complementary element to overall sporting excellence rather than a primary soft power enhancement mechanism.

##### 4.2.2. Systematic credibility-building through performance

Nye and Goldsmith (2011, p. 8) emphasize that soft power requires credible foundations derived from actual achievements: “without tangible accomplishments, efforts to create influence through culture or policy become meaningless and counterproductive.” Vietnam's systematic sporting improvement over three decades arguably provides the strongest empirical evidence supporting its sports diplomacy strategy. Vietnam's SEA Games medal progression demonstrates unprecedented sustainable capacity development in the region's recent history: from 3 gold medals (7th place) upon returning at the 15th SEA Games to 205 gold medals (1st place) at the 31st SEA Games, sustained with 136 gold medals (1st place) at the 32nd SEA Games.

Additionally, Vietnam demonstrates competitive capacity across diverse sporting categories—traditional regional sports (badminton, pencak silat), mass-appeal team sports (football, volleyball), core Olympic sports (athletics, swimming, weightlifting, gymnastics), and emerging sports (esports, obstacle racing) (May, 2025). This diversity signals comprehensive development rather than narrow specialization, potentially consolidating credibility regarding middle power ambitions. Success in football—Southeast Asia's most popular sport with massive fan bases—carries special symbolic significance, attracting regional attention and public engagement beyond elite athletes or sports ministry officials. Vietnam's football team has achieved notable regional and international successes, including reaching the final World Cup 2022 qualifying round (Top 12 Asia), second and third AFF Cup championships in 2018 and 2024, alongside historic runner-up finish at the 2018 U23 Asian Championship and Top 4 at ASIAD 2018. These achievements generated strong Vietnamese public excitement and attracted regional media attention, with all ASEAN nations and Asian countries like South Korea and Japan praising Vietnamese football's remarkable development (Nhan Dan Newspaper, 2025; Thu, 2024).

Vietnam's sporting rise coincides with Thailand's relative stagnation and Indonesia's and Malaysia's inconsistent performance over the past decade, creating perceptual shifts in the regional sporting hierarchy. Thailand—historically Southeast Asia's dominant sporting power—has witnessed Vietnam's overtaking, potentially influencing broader perceptions of relative national dynamics and developmental trajectories. However, Vietnamese sports also face major challenges: Maintaining

leading SEA Games performance requires continued significant investment in sporting infrastructure, athlete development, and coaching systems. As other ASEAN nations (especially Thailand, Indonesia, Philippines, Singapore, Malaysia) begin increasing sports budgets to respond to Vietnam's strength, regional competitive dynamics will likely intensify (Aziz, 2022; Ishak, 2025; Thailand Nations, 2025).

#### 4.2.3. Host nation diplomacy and nation branding

Vietnam's hosting of the 22nd and 31st SEA Games exemplifies strategic deployment transforming major sporting events into platforms demonstrating organizational capacity, forecasting national transformation, and positioning increasingly influential regional standing. Vietnam's SEA Games hosting approach reflects three interconnected mechanisms through which major sporting events operate as soft power tools: (i) Successful event management encompassing complex logistics, security coordination, diplomatic protocol, and international media relations demonstrates broader state capacity relevant to economic partnerships, development cooperation, and regional governance initiatives; (ii) Hosting approaches emphasizing fairness, transparency, inclusiveness, and sportsmanship—rather than solely maximizing medals—potentially build international credibility and trust, essential elements for sustainable soft power effectiveness; (iii) International media attention concentration and diplomatic activities surrounding major events create narrow opportunities for reshaping outdated international perceptions and conveying desired national narratives about modernity, dynamism, and regional responsibility.

**4.2.3.1. SEA games 22.** The 22nd SEA Games, held in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City (December 5-13, 2003), gathered approximately 5000 athletes from eleven ASEAN nations competing in thirty-two sports under the official motto “For Regional Development and Integration” (Vietnam News Agency, 2003). This timing carried strategic diplomatic significance: 2003 marked Vietnam's consolidation phase after eight years of ASEAN membership and diplomatic normalization with the United States, while the nation prepared for WTO accession negotiations. The decision to host the SEA Games for the first time represented a calculated “gamble” that successful organization would demonstrate institutional capacity and promote international perceptions of Vietnam's transformation from post-conflict recovery to dynamic development (Creak & Trotier, 2024, p. 14). Vietnam pursued three interconnected diplomatic objectives through hosting the 22nd SEA Games.

First, the event demonstrated organizational capacity and institutional stability—critical signals for a post-conflict nation seeking to attract foreign direct investment, expand international trade partnerships, and overcome persistent perceptions of instability or underdevelopment (Creak & Trotier, 2024, p. 14). Successfully hosting a major international sporting event, encompassing complex logistics, security coordination, diplomatic protocol, and media management, conveyed broader state capacity in managing complex projects—capabilities potentially relevant to economic partnerships, development cooperation, and regional governance initiatives. As Grix and Lee (2013) note, hosting mega-events operates as a “coming-out party” for emerging powers, offering concentrated opportunities to showcase national achievements before international audiences. This argument was demonstrated by South Korea's success in hosting the 1988 Seoul Olympics, projecting the image of “a developed, modern, and prosperous country to the world,” particularly during intense democratization processes at that time (Pardo, 2022).

Second, the 22nd SEA Games created forums for multilateral diplomatic activity and demonstrated commitment to ASEAN community-building (Embassy of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 2004). The event facilitated bilateral meetings between ASEAN leaders and sports ministers, enabled people-to-people exchanges among regional athletes and officials, and symbolically demonstrated Vietnam's transformation from “former adversary” to constructive regional partner (Creak &

Trotier, 2024, p. 15). The hosting slogan—“For Regional Development and Integration”—proactively emphasized collective progress rather than narrow nationalism, displaying Vietnam's cooperative spirit with ASEAN.

Third, the 22nd SEA Games reflected Vietnam's transformation from post-war recovery to dynamic development, challenging outdated Western media conceptions. Media coverage of modern sporting facilities, urban infrastructure improvements in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, and enthusiastic public participation conveyed messages of stability, prosperity, and future orientation—directly contrasting Western media imagery often stuck in wartime devastation narratives or emphasizing poverty and underdevelopment (Vietnam News Agency, 2003).

Vietnam's facilitation of East Timor (Timor-Leste) participation in the 22nd SEA Games—despite the nation only gaining independence in 2002 and lacking adequate sporting infrastructure or official SEA Games Federation membership—enhanced Vietnam's image in supporting weaker neighbors (Toan & Hai, 2003). This gesture positioned Vietnam as a responsible, solidary regional participant committed to helping emerging nations integrate into regional institutions, potentially generating goodwill, especially among smaller ASEAN members (Laos, Cambodia, Brunei), who might empathize with East Timor's developmental challenges. The action declaring 100% sponsorship for East Timor's delegation at an average of USD 30 per person/day, with 50% reductions for Laos and Cambodia, received praise and recognition from ASEAN members during the meeting of 11 Southeast Asian nation delegation heads on October 30, 2003 (Toan & Hai, 2003). This demonstrates that the 22nd SEA Games achieved its primary objective of displaying Vietnam's post-war recovery, with regional media frequently reporting positively and emphasizing effective event management and enthusiastic public support (Vietnam News Agency, 2003). Vietnam's sporting achievement broke through to first place with 158 gold medals, the first time in Vietnamese sporting history ranking first regionally.

**4.2.3.2. SEA games 31.** The 31st SEA Games, held from May 12-23, 2022, represented a qualitatively different sports diplomacy deployment, reflecting Vietnam's economic capacity, organizational sophistication, and regional ambitions nearly two decades after its first hosting. With an estimated investment of USD 77 million, the Games welcomed approximately 7000 athletes across forty sports under the ambitious slogan “For a Stronger Southeast Asia” (Nhan Dan Newspaper, 2022). The event occurred when Vietnam had become Southeast Asia's fifth-largest economy (Ngoc, 2023a), with steady annual growth averaging 6.5% throughout three decades of “Doi Moi” (Kiet, Nguyen, et al., 2025).

Organizing the 31st SEA Games during the post-COVID-19 global recovery period created special opportunities to demonstrate crisis management capacity. The Games had been postponed from 2021 due to pandemic conditions, and Vietnam's ability to successfully implement health protocols while maintaining competitive integrity demonstrated governance effectiveness, institutional resilience, and public health capacity (Government Electronic Newspaper, 2023). Regional stakeholder validation provided some evidence of positive perceptual shifts. Singapore Parliament Speaker Tan Chuan-Jin, who led Singapore's delegation during his visit, publicly declared: “Organizing the 31st SEA Games while the world was heavily affected by COVID-19 shows Vietnam is at a very high level” (Government Electronic Newspaper, 2023). Additionally, Malaysian delegation head Dato' Paduka Nur Azmi Ahmad assessed being “completely reassured about the My Dinh Aquatics Center and National Sports Training Center in Hanoi” (Embassy of Vietnam in Singapore, 2022). Meanwhile, Thailand Olympic Committee Vice President Supitr Samahito acknowledged: “I had the opportunity to visit almost all competition venues. The facilities meet standards, the stadiums and arenas are modern, so we are very satisfied” (Nhan Dan Newspaper, 2022). Vietnamese delegation head Tran Duc Phan affirmed to the press: “In the most recent meeting with delegation heads, all 11

delegates highly appreciated Vietnam's organizational work and facility quality. They said some sports organization reached continental and world levels" (Vietnam News, 2022). As Nye (2004, p. 11) argues, "soft power derives from other nations' recognition of a country's qualities and capabilities." This shows that ASEAN member nations' recognition has helped Vietnam's position increasingly elevate regionally and internationally.

The decision to organize the 31st SEA Games across twelve provinces and cities—rather than concentrating events in Hanoi—served multiple strategic purposes. Geographically, decentralization demonstrated balanced regional development beyond major urban centers, highlighting infrastructure investments in secondary cities like Da Nang, Can Tho, and Hai Phong (Nhan Dan Newspaper, 2022). Administratively, it displayed coordination capacity across multiple provincial jurisdictions, signaling institutional effectiveness beyond central government control. Economically, it distributed tourism revenue and international attention across diverse regions, promoting sub-national development (Embassy of Vietnam in Singapore, 2022). Symbolically, it projected an image of comprehensive, inclusive modernization rather than capital-centric development models common in Southeast Asia. This approach distinguished Vietnam's hosting model from most previous SEA Games, potentially enhancing distinctiveness in regional memory.

#### 4.2.4. Sports as diplomatic bridges

Vietnam has endeavored to leverage sports as a relationship normalization mechanism and diplomatic cooperation channels, particularly valuable given complex historical contexts with regional neighbors, especially Thailand. As Murray (2020) notes, "sports can create neutral platforms for interaction between nations experiencing political tensions, enabling dialogue maintenance without explicit political concessions." Vietnam-Thailand political relations—historically tense during the 1980s Cambodian conflict when Bangkok supported Khmer Rouge resistance (Turley, 1987, pp. 149-150)—have been normalized through diplomacy and economics, especially sports. Joint training camps, coach exchanges, and spirited but generally friendly sporting competitions (especially football) may contribute to positive public atmospheres supporting formal bilateral cooperation. Interactions between Thai and Vietnamese athletes at SEA Games and through professional sporting leagues create "another important step in leveraging sports as a means to develop cooperation between the two countries" as Thailand-Vietnam Friendship Association President Sanan Angubolkul stated regarding the U17 women's football friendly match between Thailand and Vietnam to be held in Hanoi on April 3, 2025 (Vietnam Plus, 2025a), helping reduce historical enmity among younger generations without direct memories of 1980s conflicts.

Vietnam actively promotes regional sports cooperation. At the third meeting of the 16th ASEAN Senior Officials Meeting on Sports (SOMS-16) on October 14, 2025, Vietnam proposed the ASEAN Sports Cooperation Strategy for 2026-2030, prioritizing community sports, school sports, women's sports, and sports for people with disabilities, while promoting digital transformation and applying science and technology to sports management and training (Vietnam Plus, 2025b). Within the 2nd ASEAN-China Sports Ministers Meeting framework on October 17, Vietnam proposed three key cooperation initiatives for 2025-2030: developing sports human resources through establishing the ASEAN-China Sports Training and Research Center Network, expanding scholarship programs and expert exchanges; promoting ASEAN-China youth sports through tournaments, summer camps, and student exchange programs, aiming to nurture dynamic and creative young generations; and promoting cultural values in sports, integrating development of traditional sports like Wushu, Tai Chi, Sepak Takraw, and Chinese Chess, while developing sports tourism and media cooperation (Vietnam News, 2025a).

Vietnam also participates in expanding the "ASEAN Sports Region" initiative to Phase III with participation from Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, and Vietnam, after Phase I (2022-2023) completed in

Cambodia and Indonesia, and Phase II (2024-2025) currently being implemented in Laos, Myanmar, and Thailand. Vietnam emphasizes strengthening cooperation with external partners like Japan, South Korea, China, and international organizations like FIFA, the World Anti-Doping Agency (Vietnam News, 2025b). These efforts reflect Vietnam's commitment to building a cohesive and sustainably developed ASEAN community through sports, positioning Vietnam as a constructive regional actor committed to collective development rather than narrow national interests. This aligns with ASEAN's founding focus on "community-building, consensus-based cooperation, and mutual support" (ASEAN, 2025, p. 30). Creak and Trotier (2024, p. 5) argue that SEA Games operate as "laboratories for regional identity," where ASEAN members practice cooperation, negotiate regional norms, and build shared narratives about "Southeast Asian identity" through sporting competition and cultural exchange. Vietnam's enthusiastic participation and advocacy for this regional sporting system demonstrates commitment to ASEAN identity and solidarity. Sports diplomacy supports Vietnam's "diversification and multilateralization" doctrine by creating supplementary interaction channels with regional and global partners, complementing economic and political relationships.

## 5. Conclusion

This study provides the first comprehensive scholarly analysis of Vietnam's sports diplomacy strategy deployment to facilitate geopolitical transformation from regional isolation to middle power status in Southeast Asia. Through systematically examining Vietnam's SEA Games participation trajectory across four historical phases—Cold War participation as the Republic of Vietnam (1959-1975), post-unification absence during political isolation (1975-1989), strategic re-entry and gradual integration (1989-2003), and emergence as regional sporting power (2004-present)—this study demonstrates how sporting engagement both reflects and potentially accelerates diplomatic repositioning processes. Applying Joseph Nye's three-pillar soft power theoretical framework: culture, political values, and foreign policy, this study identifies four strategic pillars characterizing Vietnam's sports diplomacy approach: (i) Cultural integration through distinctive national sports, especially Vovinam and Wushu martial arts; (ii) Systematic credibility-building through significantly improved sporting performance from last place when initially re-participating in 1989 to current first place; (iii) Strategic exploitation of hosting opportunities at the 22nd and 31st SEA Games for nation branding and demonstrating organizational capacity; and (iv) Using sports as diplomatic bridges to normalize relations with former regional adversaries, especially Thailand.

In summary, Vietnam's transformation from last place ranking upon re-entering the 15th SEA Games to regional sporting dominance at the 31st and 32nd SEA Games temporally correlates with broader diplomatic development from 1995 ASEAN membership toward recognized middle power influence regionally and globally. This trajectory provides understanding of the "dialectical" relationship between sports and politics articulated in this study's theoretical framework: political decisions enable sporting participation, sporting participation facilitates diplomatic normalization, improved relations allow expanded investment, sporting achievements potentially enhance prestige, and enhanced prestige may have created leadership opportunities. This circular, mutually reinforcing dynamic suggests sports not only reflect pre-existing political conditions but can actively contribute to diplomatic relationship transformation.

## CRedit authorship contribution statement

**Vo Van That:** Writing – original draft, Visualization, Validation, Conceptualization. **Tran Thi Thanh Van:** Writing – original draft, Validation, Supervision, Software, Funding acquisition. **Le Hoang Kiet:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology,

Conceptualization. **Nguyen Dinh Co:** Data curation, Conceptualization. **Pranjal Khare:** Writing – original draft, Methodology.

### Ethics statement

Not applicable.

### Declaration of the use of AI

The authors acknowledge the use of ChatGPT exclusively for English language editing and proofreading purposes, as English is not the authors' native language. All intellectual content, research findings, and interpretations presented in this manuscript are the authors' own work. The authors assume full responsibility for the accuracy and integrity of all content and statements herein.

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### Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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### Data availability

The data used in this study were obtained from secondary sources. Raw data were not collected and used in this particular article.

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