

From global standards to national practice: Vietnam's localization of United Nations peacekeeping norms and the pursuit of SDG 16

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Abstract

This study examines the extent to which Vietnam's participation in United Nations (UN) peacekeeping reflects the mechanism of norm localization within a broader context of norm cascade. Drawing on the norm life cycle framework and Acharya's theory of localization, the article argues that while Vietnam entered peacekeeping during a phase of widespread institutionalization and peer pressure, the substance of its engagement has been shaped by selective reinterpretation rather than wholesale adoption. Through stages of contestation, domestic reframing grounded in Ho Chi Minh Thought, and adaptation via grafting and pruning, peacekeeping norms were embedded within Vietnam's sovereignty-centered defense doctrine and the "Four Nos" policy. Since 2019, peacekeeping has increasingly functioned as a platform for projecting Vietnam's preventive and non-aligned security principles within multilateral frameworks. The study further shows that this localization dynamic enables Vietnam to contribute to Sustainable Development Goal 16, particularly in violence reduction and civilian protection, while preserving core normative commitments. The Vietnamese case highlights how norm cascade and localization interact to produce context-sensitive yet internationally relevant security engagement.

Keywords: norm localization, United Nations peacekeeping, SDG 16, Vietnam

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1. Introduction

Over the past decade, United Nations (UN) peacekeeping has undergone significant transformation, evolving from traditional ceasefire monitoring toward complex, multidimensional operations involving civilian protection, institutional capacity-building, and post-conflict stabilization. Within this evolving landscape, the participation of troop- and police-contributing countries from the global south has become increasingly central to the effectiveness and legitimacy of peacekeeping operations. Vietnam's growing engagement in UN peacekeeping since 2014 represents a notable case within this broader trend, particularly given its historically cautious defense policy and strong emphasis on sovereignty, non-alignment, and strategic autonomy.

Vietnam officially joined UN peacekeeping operations in 2014, later than many other developing countries, yet its trajectory since then has been marked by steady expansion in both scope and institutional depth. From the initial deployment of individual officers, Vietnam has moved toward more complex forms of contribution, including the deployment of Level 2 Field Hospitals and engineering units, as well as sustained participation across multiple missions such as United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) and United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA). Despite the relatively modest scale of its contributions compared to major troop-contributing countries, Vietnam's engagement has attracted growing international attention due to its consistency, professionalism, and emphasis on non-combat and humanitarian roles. (Ministry of National Defense [MND], n.d.; MND, 2021)

Rather than reflecting a sudden policy shift, Vietnam's participation in UN peacekeeping should be understood as the outcome of a gradual and deliberate process of norm engagement and reinterpretation. From the outset, Vietnam did not approach peacekeeping as a ready-made set of international security practices to be adopted wholesale. Instead, its engagement has unfolded through a selective and context-sensitive process, shaped by long-standing defense principles, historical experiences of war and post-war reconstruction, and evolving foreign policy priorities. This makes Vietnam a particularly instructive case for examining how states actively mediate global security norms, rather than passively internalizing them, in order to preserve coherence with domestic normative frameworks.

This study shifts the focus from whether Vietnam complies with UN peacekeeping norms to how it selects, interprets, and applies them. The central question, therefore, is to what extent does Vietnam's expansion in UN peacekeeping reflect the mechanism of norm localization, when situated within the broader context of norm cascade? By examining this process, the paper seeks to illuminate how Vietnam's engagement with UN peacekeeping serves as a strategic means of contributing to international peace while simultaneously reinforcing national priorities related to sovereignty, preventive security, and a peace-oriented defense posture.

2. Literature review and theoretical framework

The Norm Life Cycle - The "norm life cycle" framework was introduced by Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink in their seminal article *International Norm Dynamics and Political Change*, published in *International Organization* in 1998. This framework constitutes one of the foundational contributions of constructivist scholarship to the study of international norm diffusion and political change. According to Finnemore and Sikkink, international norms develop through three stages. First, during norm emergence, norm entrepreneurs promote new standards of appropriate behavior through persuasion and moral framing, often facing resistance. Second, once a critical mass of states adopts the norm, a norm cascade occurs, driven primarily by socialization, legitimacy concerns, and peer pressure rather than coercion. Finally, in the stage of norm internalization, norms

become taken for granted and embedded in domestic institutions, shaping routine state practice and identity. (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998).

The norm life cycle framework has been widely used to analyze the diffusion of international norms, particularly in areas such as human rights and humanitarian governance, and to explain norm adoption in the absence of coercion by emphasizing legitimacy and social acceptance. (Risse, Ropp, & Sikkink, 1999; Checkel, 2005) In this study, however, the framework is not used to explain domestic implementation but to contextualize Vietnam's entry into UN peacekeeping within a broader phase of global norm diffusion. As a late entrant, Vietnam encountered peacekeeping norms at a stage where core principles were already institutionalized in UN practice. The framework thus clarifies the structural conditions of exposure shaping Vietnam's initial engagement.

Norm localization - The concept of norm localization was systematically developed by Amitav Acharya (2004), who conceptualizes it as a trajectory consisting of four analytically distinct stages, each associated with conditions that enable progress. The first stage, pre-localization, is characterized by resistance and contestation toward external norms. Such reactions arise from doubts about their utility and compatibility, as well as concerns that they may undermine existing beliefs or institutions. Importantly, contestation does not necessarily imply rejection; it can create space for localization when external norms are perceived as strengthening, rather than displacing, domestic frameworks. The second stage, local initiative, emphasizes the role of insider proponents who actively frame and reinterpret international norms to resonate with local audiences. Localization is more likely where credible local actors are present and where a society maintains a strong sense of distinct identity.

The third stage, adaptation through grafting and pruning, represents the core mechanism of localization. External norms are selectively attached to compatible local practices while incompatible elements are trimmed away. This process allows norm borrowing to supplement rather than replace the existing normative hierarchy, preserving continuity in the local order. The final stage, amplification and universalization, occurs when localized norms generate new practices and institutional arrangements while retaining visible local characteristics. Through this process, elements of the local normative order may gain broader recognition beyond the domestic context.

Vietnam's trajectory in United Nations peacekeeping operations - Vietnam's engagement with United Nations peacekeeping evolved gradually through cautious exposure, institutional preparation, and incremental operational commitment. Initial involvement in the 1990s was limited to observer roles in UN-supported missions and financial contributions, reflecting prudence toward direct participation in international security activities. (Son Ha, 2025) A policy shift emerged in 2011, when Vietnam initiated inter-agency survey delegations to assess peacekeeping missions on the ground, marking a transition from passive exposure to active preparation. (Ministry of National Defense [MND], n.d.; Son Ha, 2025) This trajectory gained decisive political backing in 2012 with Politburo approval of a master plan on UN peacekeeping participation. Institutionalization followed in 2014 with the establishment of the Vietnam Peacekeeping Center and the deployment of liaison officers to UNMISS - an entry strategy that allowed experiential learning while limiting operational risk. (MND, n.d.; MND, 2021).

From 2018 onward, Vietnam expanded into unit-based deployments, most notably Level 2 Field Hospitals, while maintaining a focus on non-combat and humanitarian roles. By 2025, nearly 1,100 personnel had been deployed, including a relatively high proportion of women peacekeepers, indicating growing operational capacity and international recognition. (Vietnam Department of Peacekeeping Operations, 2025) This gradual trajectory provides the empirical basis for examining how peacekeeping norms were selectively localized within Vietnam's sovereignty-centered policy framework.

3. Vietnam's engagement and localization of UN Peacekeeping norms

Norm cascade and Vietnam's exposure to UN Peacekeeping norms - When an international norm enters the cascade phase, states increasingly adopt it under conditions of socialization, legitimacy-seeking, and peer pressure rather than direct coercion (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998). In the field of UN peacekeeping, this dynamic became pronounced in the post-Cold War era, when more than 120 states had contributed personnel by the 2010s. Institutional reforms following the Brahimi Report (2000) further consolidated peacekeeping as a standardized and widely accepted multilateral practice. Within this expanding normative environment, non-participation became progressively difficult to sustain in reputational terms. Vietnam's consideration of peacekeeping can therefore be interpreted as a response to an ongoing norm cascade. As more regional and global actors joined peacekeeping missions, participation increasingly signaled responsible membership in international society.

This orientation was formally articulated in Politburo Resolution No. 22-NQ/TW (2013), which emphasized proactive participation in multilateral institutions, strict compliance with international commitments, and the enhancement of Vietnam's international position and prestige. (CPV, 2013) These formulations reflect the motivations identified by Finnemore and Sikkink as legitimation, conformity, and esteem, suggesting that peacekeeping participation was linked to identity-based considerations rather than purely material calculations. External expectations further reinforced this shift. Following Vietnam's tenure as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council (2008-2009), calls for more tangible contributions to international peace and security intensified. By 2014, Vietnam, alongside Laos and Myanmar, remained among the last ASEAN members not yet deploying personnel to UN peacekeeping. Repeated inquiries from international partners and offers of training assistance from countries such as the United Kingdom, India, Australia, and Japan heightened awareness that prolonged abstention would incur reputational costs. (Nguyen, 2025)

Selective localization of UN Peacekeeping norms

Pre-localization: Resistance and Contestation. Consistent with Acharya's framework, Vietnam's initial response was characterized by caution and contestation. (Acharya, 2004) As a country that had experienced decades of war, faced prolonged security challenges, and only began its international integration relatively late, through the Đổi mới reforms in 1986, accession to ASEAN in 1995, and membership in the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2007, Vietnam approached new international security norms with a high degree of prudence. (CPV, 2013) Although, as discussed earlier, Vietnam increasingly recognized the urgency of participating in United Nations peacekeeping as the norm entered a norm cascade phase and generated growing peer pressure from the international community, political leaders and policymakers continued to display the characteristic caution associated with pre-localization.

According to *Journey for Peace*, the memoir of Senior Lieutenant General Nguyễn Chí Vịnh, this caution was reinforced by "less positive information about peacekeeping forces on the ground," including reports of "casualties incurred during participation in UN peacekeeping operations" and incidents that "undermined credibility at certain missions, such as sexual abuse, prostitution, and internal violence among peacekeepers," as well as by core concerns that participation could adversely affect Vietnam's independence, autonomy, and national interests whose concerns shaped in part by precedents observed in cases such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Cambodia. (Nguyen, 2025)

Local initiative: Entrepreneurship and Framing. Localization required credible insider proponents capable of reframing peacekeeping in domestically resonant terms. In Vietnam, Ho Chi Minh Thought served as a key discursive resource. Participation in UN peacekeeping was linked to Ho Chi Minh's long-articulated commitment to peace and international solidarity, allowing peacekeeping to be interpreted not as the importation of foreign security norms, but as a contemporary expression of an established national mission.

Given the profound influence of Ho Chi Minh Thought on Vietnamese society, particularly among members

of the armed forces, who are regularly exposed to systematic education and analysis of this ideological framework, such framing carries significant persuasive power. The inclusion of Ho Chi Minh's 1946 telegram to the United Nations in the handbook of every Party member within the Vietnam Department of Peacekeeping Operations serves not only as a symbolic reminder of the historical continuity of Vietnam's peace-oriented worldview, but also as a mechanism for reinforcing the legitimacy of domestic actors advocating participation in UN peacekeeping. (Nguyen, 2025)

This framing strategy becomes especially salient when participation in peacekeeping is explicitly linked to the strategic objective of "protecting the Fatherland early and from afar" in an evolving international security environment. (MND, 2019) Rather than being understood as external military engagement, peacekeeping is reinterpreted as a conflict-prevention instrument that contributes to the preservation of a broader peaceful environment, thereby directly safeguarding national security interests. In Acharya's terms, this marks the point at which external norms begin to be recognized as complementary to the existing domestic normative order, enhancing its legitimacy and effectiveness without undermining its foundational beliefs.

Adaptation: Grafting and Pruning. According to Acharya's norm localization framework, adaptation occurs when international norms are selectively reconstituted to fit domestic normative structures through two parallel mechanisms: grafting, whereby compatible elements are retained and embedded, and pruning, whereby incompatible elements are excluded (Acharya, 2004). In Vietnam's case, this stage is most clearly reflected in the way the country has defined the scope and substance of its participation in United Nations peacekeeping operations, particularly through the formalization of eligible areas of contribution and the exclusion of combat-oriented roles.

The normative foundation for this adaptive process was laid by Resolution No. 22-NQ/TW (2013), which conceptualizes international integration as a process of "both cooperation and struggle," emphasizing national interests, strategic autonomy, and proactive engagement without alignment-based confrontation (CPV, 2013). This orientation established that engagement with international security norms, including peacekeeping, would be conditional and bounded rather than unconditional. In the defense domain, this logic is further specified through the "Four Nos" defense policy reaffirmed in the 2019 Defense White Paper (MND, 2019). These principles function as a normative boundary-setting mechanism, shaping the permissible scope of participation in multilateral security arrangements.

The mechanisms of grafting and pruning are institutionalized in subsequent regulations governing Vietnam's participation in UN peacekeeping forces (GOV, 2021), which define permitted roles such as staff and advisory functions, logistics, engineering, medical services, policing, and military observation. This delineation illustrates grafting: Vietnam prioritizes humanitarian, technical, and monitoring components of peacekeeping norms that align with its defensive security doctrine. Pruning is evident in the deliberate avoidance of direct combat or peace-enforcement missions. This exclusion reflects not merely technical or capacity-related considerations, but a conscious normative boundary designed to ensure that participation does not undermine the core principles of non-alignment, non-intervention, and strategic autonomy embedded in the "Four Nos" policy.

Amplification and "Universalization": scaling up norms through practice. Since 2019, Vietnam's engagement in UN peacekeeping increasingly reflects the amplification and "selective universalization" stage in Acharya's localization framework. At this stage, the significance lies less in quantitative expansion than in a doctrinal shift whereby peacekeeping norms are integrated into, and mobilized in support of, Vietnam's national defense strategy.

The 2019 Defense White Paper marks a critical turning point. Through the repeated articulation of the principle of "protecting the Fatherland early and from afar," the document situates participation in multilateral security mechanisms (including UN peacekeeping) within Vietnam's broader defensive and preventive security doctrine (MND, 2019). Peacekeeping is framed not as external intervention but as a mechanism for preserving a stable international environment conducive to national development. This shift alters the direction of normative

interaction. Whereas earlier stages involved grafting UN norms onto domestic practices, post-2019 peacekeeping increasingly serves to amplify and internationalize core elements of Vietnam's own doctrine, particularly conflict prevention, non-intervention, and early risk mitigation.

Moreover, operational practice reinforces this transformation. At UNMISS and MINUSCA, Vietnam has sustained deployments of liaison officers, engineering units, and Level 2 Field Hospitals, contributing to force health protection, civilian protection, and stabilization mandates (MND, n.d.). These activities are consistently interpreted through the lens of preventive security, managing instability at its source in order to reduce distant risks, thereby aligning operational engagement with the strategic logic of "protecting the Fatherland early and from afar." Institutionally, this phase has been consolidated through subsequent legal and regulatory measures, including Decree No. 07/2025/ND-CP, Circular No. 32/2025/TT-BQP, and the 2025–2030 peacekeeping roadmap (People's Army Newspaper, 2025), embedding peacekeeping more firmly within Vietnam's defense governance framework. Therefore, Vietnam's post-2019 trajectory reveals a subtle reversal of normative direction: peacekeeping is no longer merely adapted to domestic constraints but increasingly functions as a platform through which Vietnam projects and legitimizes its own defense principles within the multilateral security order.

4. Advancing SDG 16 in practice: norm localization and operational impact

SDG 16.1: Reducing violence through preventive peacekeeping - Vietnam's participation in United Nations peacekeeping contributes to SDG 16.1 "significantly reduce all forms of violence and related death rates everywhere" which primarily through preventive and stabilizing mechanisms rather than coercive force. Within missions such as UNMISS and MINUSCA, Vietnam has consistently prioritized non-combat roles, including Level 2 Field Hospitals, military observers, staff officers, engineering units, and mission support functions. These roles directly reinforce core Protection of Civilians (POC) mandates and enhance the UN's capacity to manage violence in fragile environments. (MND, 2021; The Global Goals, n.d.) Vietnamese medical units, in particular, play a critical role in reducing mortality associated with armed conflict, insecurity, and weak health infrastructure. By providing emergency surgery, trauma care, disease control, and medical evacuation support in high-risk areas, these units mitigate both direct and indirect forms of conflict-related violence. Simultaneously, Vietnamese officers serving in observation, liaison, and analytical positions strengthen early-warning systems, ceasefire monitoring, and intra-mission coordination, thereby contributing to violence prevention and conflict de-escalation.

Crucially, this contribution aligns with Vietnam's localization of peacekeeping norms. Rather than engaging in enforcement-oriented operations, Vietnam interprets violence reduction through the lens of preventive security, managing instability before escalation and addressing humanitarian consequences that often perpetuate cycles of violence. In this sense, Vietnam advances SDG 16.1 not by expanding coercive capacity, but by reinforcing institutional mechanisms that reduce structural and situational drivers of violence in conflict-affected settings.

SDG 16.2: Protecting children through civilian-stabilization environments - Vietnam's peacekeeping engagement also advances SDG 16.2, which seeks to end abuse, exploitation, trafficking, and violence against children. Although Vietnamese contingents do not operate specialized child-protection units, their deployments contribute to the civilian-protection architecture within which child-protection norms are implemented. Medical units have treated child victims of conflict-related injuries and disease, directly addressing acute vulnerabilities. More broadly, the maintenance of disciplined, non-combat-oriented deployments strengthens safe operating spaces for humanitarian agencies, education providers, and UN child-protection actors. In fragile settings, the stabilization of security environments and access to medical care constitute foundational conditions for preventing abuse and exploitation.

Experiences in the Central African Republic further illustrate this preventive dimension. While UN regulations restrict the distribution of food or money, Vietnamese peacekeepers provided permissible forms of

psychosocial support, including donating simple sports equipment such as soccer ball to create safe recreational spaces for children who had lost family members or were living in insecure conditions. Engineering contingents also offered English teaching and basic information technology instruction, subsequently mobilizing additional learning materials to address educational gaps. (Nguyen, 2025) Such initiatives reduce exposure to neglect, recruitment, and exploitation by strengthening community resilience and access to structured activities in high-risk environments. These contributions advance SDG 16.2 indirectly but substantively by reinforcing the institutional and community conditions necessary for child protection in fragile settings.

5. Conclusion

This study asked to what extent Vietnam's expansion in UN peacekeeping reflects the mechanism of norm localization within a broader context of norm cascade. The findings suggest that while Vietnam's initial engagement was shaped by the cascade phase of global peacekeeping norms, where participation signaled responsible membership and carried reputational implications, the form and substance of its contribution were decisively structured by localization dynamics.

Rather than adopting UN peacekeeping norms wholesale, Vietnam selectively interpreted, bounded, and embedded them within a sovereignty-centered defense doctrine. Through pre-localization contestation, local reframing grounded in Ho Chi Minh Thought, and adaptation via grafting and pruning, peacekeeping was reconstructed as a preventive and non-aligned security instrument consistent with the "Four Nos" policy. Since 2019, this process has moved beyond adaptation toward amplification, as peacekeeping increasingly serves as a platform through which Vietnam projects its own preventive and peace-oriented defense principles within multilateral frameworks. Thus, Vietnam's trajectory reflects norm localization to a substantial degree: international norms were not merely internalized but rearticulated to preserve domestic normative hierarchies while enabling meaningful global engagement.

This localization dynamic also explains Vietnam's operational contributions to SDG 16. By translating peacekeeping into preventive, civilian-protection-oriented practices, Vietnam advances violence reduction and child-protection objectives without compromising its core commitments to sovereignty and strategic autonomy. Conversely, SDG 16 benefits from the participation of states that adapt global norms to diverse domestic contexts, broadening the coalition capable of sustaining peace operations.

The Vietnamese case thus illustrates a reciprocal relationship between global and local norms: cascade creates exposure, localization shapes implementation, and amplification enables outward projection. In an increasingly contested international order, such calibrated norm mediation may be essential for sustaining inclusive and durable forms of multilateral security cooperation.

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