CHARLES UNIVERSITY IN PRAGUE
Faculty of Social Sciences
Institute of International Studies

PROTOCOL ON MASTER THESIS ASSESSMENT
(Supervisor)

Name of the student: Alexandre Laurent Adelinet

Title: Navigating Ambiguities: Unravelling Russia's Hedging Strategy in the South China Sea

Supervisor: Jan Hornát

1. TOPIC AND OBJECTIVE (short information on the thesis, research objective):

Security and economic issues related to the South China Sea (SCS) are abundantly discussed in the existing international relations (IR) scholarship. However, a piece of the geopolitical puzzle has been ominously missing – the position of Russia in questions concerning the various disputes and disputants in the region. Though Russia is not a state with immediate national interests in the SCS, it is not just a passive onlooker in regional power dynamics, but an actor with an emerging strategic posture, as the submitted thesis demonstrates. Alexandre has thus selected a topical and relevant theme for his MA thesis.

In the thesis, Alexandre argues that Russia conducts a hedging strategy in the SCS and explores this assumption on a case study of Moscow's relations with Vietnam. Concretely, the thesis asks, "How do Russia's endeavours with Vietnam in the South China Sea constitute 'strategic hedging' towards China?" (p. 8). In the first step to answer the said question, Alexandre – building on existing scholarship by Tessman (2012) and Kuik (2015) – drafts a mechanism that permits him to identify cases of hedging. He then moves to present the empirical context of relations within the "Russo-Sino-Vietnamese triangle" and in the third step, the empirical observations are filtered through the theoretical mechanism to provide a depiction of Russia's strategic behavior in the SCS.

In conclusion, Alexandre notes that his "research has found Russia to be strategically hedging against China in the South China Sea, with Vietnam as an hedge". More specifically, Moscow's "strategic hedging has been characterised by simultaneous soft balancing and soft alignment elements" (p. 53).

2. CONTENT (complexity, original approach, argument, structure, theoretical and methodological backing, work with sources, appropriateness of annexes etc.):

Alexandre demonstrates well his ability to think in a structured and disciplined manner about complex issues. Where others would depend on purely empirical observations, he introduces an original, logically designed theoretical mechanism that guides his analysis. Though the bounds of the theoretical mechanism may be too broad for the limited scope of an MA thesis, he still manages to navigate the potentially vast empirical base and provide convincing conclusions. In this sense, mainly his theoretical framework is an original contribution to contemporary scholarship.

The thesis builds both on secondary and primary sources – Alexandre aimed to balance authors based on their provenience and his list includes citations by Russian and Vietnamese scholars and experts, "Western" authors nonetheless dominate his bibliography. Still, the analysis is nuanced and representative.

3. FORMAL ASPECTS AND LANGUAGE (quality of language, citation style, graphics, formal aspects etc.):

The formal aspects of the thesis are adequate. The language is clear and citation style is unified across the entire thesis.

4. STATEMENT ON THE ORIGINALITY OF THE THESIS

The thesis was checked by the Turnitin and URKUND ani-plagiarism software and the results did not indicate any wrongdoing.

5. SHORT COMMENTS BY THE REVIEWER (overall impression, strengths and weaknesses, originality of ideas, achievement of the research objective etc.):

The overall impression of the thesis is very positive. Alexandre has demonstrated a good orientation in the existing literature – both empirical and theoretical. His analysis is mature and well-structured. His ideas and composition of the theoretical-methodological framework are original and provide a strong backbone for further analysis. Among the weaknesses of the thesis, I can name only few. I would welcome a more thorough justification of the choice of Vietnam as the case study (and why not another state from the region); also, a deeper dive into the empirics of the power dynamics in the Russo-Sino-Vietnamese triangle would be useful in strengthening the conclusions (the scope of the MA thesis does seem to be limiting here, as this research could very well be the subject of a Ph.D. dissertation). Doubtless, the thesis has achieved the objectives it set out in the introduction.

6. QUESTIONS AND COMMENTS THAT SHOULD BE ADDRESSED DURING THE DEFENCE:

1. Is Russia's hedging observable only in the case of Vietnam? Or do other states in the region have similar "hedge" positions from Moscow's perspective?
2. Does Russia's hedging create tensions in the Sino-Russian relations, i.e. how long will China tolerate Moscow's incursions with Vietnam?

7. (NON-)RECOMMENDATION AND SUGGESTED GRADE:
    (A-F):

I recommend the grade **A**.

Date: 6 June 2024   Signature: Jan Hornát