



Asia Pacific Bulletin

Number 55 | March 25, 2010

Vietnamese Diplomacy in 2010: From Vision to Action BY THUY DO

Thuy Do, Lecturer of International Politics at the Diplomatic Academy of the Vietnamese Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Fellow in the Asia Pacific Leadership Program at the East-West Center, explains that “Vietnam’s international stature has increased significantly over the past fifteen years. Building on its decision to join ASEAN in 1995, the World Trade Organization in 2006, and to serve on the UNSC in 2008-09, Vietnam is determined to pursue further international integration.”

Vietnam may be vacating its non-permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) this year, but it is certainly poised to embark on more diplomatic endeavors of regional and global significance. In 2010, the country will assume the chairmanship of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and will celebrate the sixtieth anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic ties with China. It has also been fifteen years since Vietnam pursued its omnidirectional foreign policy when the country joined ASEAN, normalized relations with the United States, and signed the Cooperation Framework Agreement with the European Union, all in 1995. This year will certainly be robust for Vietnamese diplomacy.

To prepare for its first ASEAN chairmanship this year, Hanoi established a National Committee headed by the Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister, Pham Gia Khiem, and chose the theme “Toward the ASEAN Community: From Vision to Action.” This theme, as Khiem put it, stresses that ASEAN goals should be achieved by taking concrete action to realize its Charter and accelerate the Roadmap to build the ASEAN Community by 2015.

To commemorate the sixtieth year of diplomatic relations with China, described as “the best time in history” by their leaders, Hanoi and Beijing announced 2010 as the first Sino-Vietnamese friendship year. Apart from annual high-ranking visits (with a possible state visit by President Hu to Vietnam later this year) and regular “experience sharing” seminars that bring together both countries’ Communist Parties, Vietnam and China will both host about thirty other commemorating activities. Despite the current economic hardships, bilateral trade exceeded \$20 billion in 2009 and may reach the target of \$25 billion this year. Last year, the Sino-Vietnamese border issue was finally settled with the conclusion of the Land Border Demarcation and Border Management Regulations.

Vietnam’s international stature has increased significantly over the past fifteen years. Building on its decision to join ASEAN in 1995, the World Trade Organization in 2006, and to serve on the UNSC in 2008-09, Vietnam is determined to pursue further international integration. As such, Hanoi has been called upon to play a larger role in multilateral institutions, particularly in ASEAN. With the 2010 ASEAN Chairmanship, Vietnam has the opportunity to fulfill this vision.

Hanoi defines the current financial turmoil, energy security, food security, public health issues, natural disasters, and climate change as global challenges that ASEAN should be prepared to handle adroitly. Other priorities that Vietnam will pursue include narrowing development gaps among member states by implementing the Initiative for ASEAN Integration and developing the Mekong sub-region, as well as accelerating regional connectivity, especially in terms of economics, trade,



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investment, transport infrastructure, cultural cooperation, people-to-people exchanges, and increasing public awareness of a Southeast Asian regional identity. Furthermore, at the fifteenth ASEAN Summit last year in Thailand, encouraging civil society engagement was accepted as a responsibility of the ASEAN Chair for the first time. Although this may seem low on Hanoi’s agenda, Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung did commit to support practical efforts of regional civil society organizations, a development that Vietnam’s fellow ASEAN neighbors and Western partners should welcome.

The biggest challenge for Vietnam’s chairmanship will be to keep ASEAN coherent amid recent calls from regional powers for wider regional frameworks. Specifically, Vietnam and ASEAN need to ensure that ASEAN’s central role in the emerging web of Asia-wide mechanisms, such as the East Asia Summit, ASEAN Plus Three, and the ASEAN Regional Forum, is not marginalized in the process. Moreover, ASEAN is considering the establishment of an East Asian Free Trade Area (EAFTA) within the ASEAN Plus Three framework and a Comprehensive Economic Partnership in East Asia among the sixteen East Asia Summit member countries. If realized, EAFTA will be the world’s largest free trade agreement with a population of two billion people and a combined gross domestic product exceeding \$10 trillion. Prime Minister Nguyen, additionally, proposed an East Asian forum on climate change on the sidelines of the World Economic Forum in Davos earlier this year. With such integration, the Prime Minister hopes that “East Asia within the next twenty to thirty years will become thoroughly connected with ASEAN as its core...”

Similarly, Hanoi should build upon the Obama administration’s efforts to re-engage Asia to continue fostering U.S.-ASEAN relations, specifically under the U.S.-ASEAN Enhanced Partnership and the U.S.-ASEAN Trade and Investment Framework Agreement. Recently, Vietnamese President Nguyen Minh Triet applauded the results of the first Lower Mekong-U.S. foreign ministerial meeting and the first U.S.-ASEAN Leaders’ Meeting between President Obama and all ten ASEAN leaders in 2009. He declared that Vietnam would continue to make active contributions, both bilaterally and multilaterally, to the development of the U.S.-ASEAN relationship.

Regarding Sino-Vietnamese relations, the unresolved South China Sea (SCS) disputes remain the thorniest issue. China’s recent plan to turn Hainan, which it claims extends to the disputed Paracel islands, into an international tourist destination has raised concerns in Hanoi. Nevertheless, as ASEAN Chair and the country coordinator for the ASEAN-China Dialogue until 2012, Vietnam can maximize its unique role as a bridge between ASEAN and China, as well as an interlocutor for the SCS dispute settlement. So far, Hanoi has proposed establishing an ASEAN-China Free Trade Area and an ASEAN-China Center. It has also long called for the active deployment of the Declaration on the Conduct of the Parties in the SCS between China and ASEAN countries. Unsurprisingly, this declaration featured prominently at the first ASEAN foreign ministerial meeting in Danang earlier this year.

The success of Vietnam’s diplomacy in 2010, therefore, very much depends on whether Hanoi can accomplish the highest priorities on its agenda while simultaneously avoiding emerging challenges. Coincidentally, this year also marks the millennial anniversary of the founding of Hanoi, poetically referred to as *Thang Long*, meaning “Ascending Dragon” in Vietnamese. As it seems, all has been set up for the “dragon” to fly.

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