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Vietnam in ASEAN and ASEAN in Vietnam

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Vietnam is increasingly looking to ASEAN as a main pillar for its foreign policy. A landmark shift occurred when Vietnam chaired ASEAN in 2010 and important regional issues such as community-building, economic connectivity, and the South China Sea were discussed and membership for the United States and Russia to the East Asia Summit was granted. Today, the overriding theme in Vietnam's foreign policy is international integration; earlier, the country emphasized only domestic economic growth and integration. Acknowledging that economic integration remains the core policy goal of Vietnam, security and regional politics are now also beginning to take a more prominent role.

Le Dinh Tinh, Deputy Director General at the Institute for Foreign Policy and Strategic Studies, Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam, and Hoang Hai Long, B.A. Student at Depauw University, explain that “Vietnam recognizes that by working with ASEAN it can have a greater impact on regional and global events, rather than by just acting alone.”

Why ASEAN?

Vietnam recognizes that by working with ASEAN it can have a greater impact on regional and global events, rather than by just acting alone. ASEAN is Vietnam's bridge to the wider world and a safety net when the country faces global and regional problems. Economically, ASEAN offers substantial benefits to Vietnam. Bilateral trade was almost \$38 billion in 2012, a ten percent increase from 2011 and accounted for 17 percent of Vietnam's total trade. ASEAN is Vietnam's third-largest market for exports after the United States and the European Union, ahead of Japan and China. Vietnam's exports to ASEAN exceeded \$17 billion in 2012, a 26 percent increase from the previous year. Singapore and Malaysia are Vietnam's 7th and 8th largest export destinations, totaling \$1.5 billion and \$2.8 billion, respectively. Vietnam's agricultural exports to ASEAN totaled almost \$4 billion in 2012, a four-fold increase since 2000. It is anticipated that intra-ASEAN trade will total 35 percent of ASEAN's total trading volume by 2020 after implementation of the ASEAN Economic Community in 2015. In addition, over a fifth of the total foreign direct investment that Vietnam receives comes from ASEAN members, almost \$47 billion at the end of 2012, with Singapore and Malaysia the largest ASEAN investors. Another growing market is tourism and people-to-people exchanges. Overall, the mutual Vietnam-ASEAN economic benefits continue on an upward trend.

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On the geostrategic stage, Vietnam has membership benefits in the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the ambitious Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), partly because it is a member of ASEAN. Other benefits of free trade agreements, including the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA), is that they have enabled Vietnam to meet international standards for macro-economic policies, tackling corruption and stimulating home-grown enterprises. Vietnam policy makers need to focus on a peaceful and stable security environment. For the sake of long-term development, Vietnam must be a fully active participant in the evolving security and political architecture currently unfolding in the region. ASEAN is not only a logical starting point for this venture; it is the anchor for the region's future. First, ASEAN provides an open venue for smaller countries to come together and establish new relationships and cement existing ones on the basis of mutual interests. With ASEAN,

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small member countries can align their interests, thus supplementing their relationships with major countries. As the Asia-Pacific attracts more attention, major countries are proactively seeking to strengthen bilateral ties with various actors in the region. Taking advantage of this new opportunity, Vietnam has reciprocated positively, deepening relations with all permanent member countries on the UN Security Council, along with other important partners including India, Japan, South Korea, and Australia.

However, as the security climate in the region becomes more complicated, a vortex of constantly shifting interests and alliances is unfolding due to the maneuvering of major powers. Vietnam is naturally seeking an enhanced web of interlocking interests with its immediate neighbors and despite its flaws ASEAN has proven to be a transparent, inclusive and effective partner for Vietnam. This partnership creates, among other things, added leverage for Vietnam to boost relationships with major countries, for instance, via the ASEAN+1 (China) and ASEAN+3 (China, Japan and South Korea) mechanisms.

Second, ASEAN helps magnify Vietnam’s ability to politically integrate into the larger Asia-Pacific region. The East Asia Summit (EAS) is the key framework for regional leaders to discuss political and strategic issues while the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) is developing into an inclusive multilateral security forum. The ASEAN Defense Ministers’ Meeting Plus (ADMM+) enables ASEAN member to interact with major powers and provides a high-level venue to discuss transnational defense-security cooperation. These forums and their success to date have proven ASEAN’s value as an honest broker and mediator for all parties in sensitive security issues. ASEAN’s centrality in regional security architecture cannot be underestimated and this relevance, vitality and influence will continue well into the future.

Why Vietnam?

ASEAN’s strength has always been the unified and combined strength of its members, and in order for ASEAN to be strong and cohesive its members have to be economically prosperous and secure. Vietnam’s successful economic development is certainly due in part to its ASEAN membership, and in turn Vietnam has also made many positive contributions to the strength of ASEAN as an institution.

After more than 20 years of reform and opening up, also known as the era of “Doi Moi” (renovation), Vietnam has made significant achievements on all fronts, including economic growth, social progress and political stability. From an import-based economy, Vietnam has exerted herself onto the global stage in trade and investment. Recently, Vietnam has risen to the status of a lower middle-income economy and is working to achieve a per capita income level of \$3,000 by 2020. Vietnam has already achieved the majority of its Millennium Development Goals ahead of the 2015 deadline, most notably in eradicating poverty and extreme hunger, and reducing child and maternal mortality rates. The country is also set to meet universal education targets by 2015.

Vietnamese Deputy Foreign Minister Pham Quang Vinh, who is also Vietnam’s current and longest-serving ASEAN Senior Officials’ Meeting (SOM) leader, often explains that it is strategically important to create an ASEAN community that applies its dynamism toward creating a shared peace, security and prosperity for the region and beyond. Vietnam’s market is 90 million, the third largest in ASEAN, with approximately 70 percent of the population between 15 and 64 years old. Vietnam’s chairmanship of ASEAN in 2010 is a vivid example of Vietnam acting as an able and committed member when it comes to translating ASEAN goals into real and tangible results. Vietnam needs ASEAN and ASEAN also needs Vietnam. Vietnam-ASEAN interaction is increasingly inter-twining the two entities’ destinies and identities together into one, to mutual benefit.

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