1

INTRODUCTION

In late 2019 Vietnam assumed the ASEAN Chairmanship and introduced the theme of a "Cohesive and Responsive ASEAN". On this occasion, Vietnam's Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc stressed,

> Throughout its twenty-five years of ASEAN membership, Vietnam has always made active and responsible contributions to ASEAN cooperation. The growth of the ASEAN community bears the hallmarks of Vietnam's work. In 2020, Vietnam will assume major responsibilities at the regional and international level, most notably the ASEAN Chairmanship. Such a responsibility gives Vietnam an opportunity to contribute more substantively to the building and growth of a harmonious, resilient, innovative, cohesive, responsible and adaptive ASEAN Community.[1]

Such an upbeat tone about ASEAN reflected a general consensus in Vietnam that the decision to join ASEAN in 1995 had been a right foreign policy

---

This chapter was adapted from the article "Vietnam-ASEAN Cooperation after the Cold War and the Continued Search for a Theoretical Framework", *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 24, no. 1 (April 2002): 106–20. Reproduced with permission of the ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute.

decision of great strategic importance.[2] Moreover, Hanoi has attached greater importance to ASEAN. On 27 August 2019, Nguyen Xuan Phuc told ASEAN Secretary General Lim Jock Hoi that Vietnam always considered ASEAN as one of the most important pillars of its foreign policy.[3] A draft of the Political Report to be introduced at the Communist Party of Vietnam Congress in first quarter of 2021 confirmed the established policy line that Vietnam will be "proactive and responsible with other ASEAN members in the building a strong ASEAN Community and maintaining the central role of ASEAN in regional security architectures".[4] In short, in retrospect, after twenty-five years, Hanoi's decision to join ASEAN was recognized as the vintage one.[5]

But it had taken almost the same amount of time for Hanoi to change its attitude towards the organization. From the policy of denial, Hanoi gradually adopted the one of peacefully coexisting with, and ultimately embracing ASEAN. Following the open-door reforms programme introduced in 1986 (widely known as *Doi Moi*), Vietnam began to develop relations with ASEAN. The process of Vietnam-ASEAN rapprochement culminated with Vietnam's signing the ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in 1991 and its admission to membership of the organization in 1995—the only formal international organization that the country entered since the end of the Cold War. Myanmar and Laos entered ASEAN in 1997 and Cambodia in 1999. It was acknowledged that after East Timor gained full independence, it too would seek membership in ASEAN. The mode of ASEAN cooperation now covers the entirety of Southeast Asian region. These developments were a contrast with what had happened earlier in Southeast Asia: the relations between Vietnam and ASEAN had, in general, reflected the patterns of amity and enmity among regional states along the ideological divide during the Cold War and especially the Vietnam War, the 1975 victory of the revolution in Indochina brought about the emergence of two opposing groups of countries in Southeast Asia, and when Vietnam intervened in Cambodia in 1979, relations between Vietnam and ASEAN became hostile.

Why did Vietnam decide to join ASEAN in 1995? Why did it attach a great significance to the peace and cooperation in Southeast Asia after the Cold War ended? And what prevented Vietnam from doing so earlier? This work will study Vietnam-ASEAN relations from early 1970s to

provide a background to a discussion on a period from 1986 (when the reforms in Vietnam officially started) to 1995 (when Vietnam became an ASEAN member). Considerable efforts were made to explain the shift towards a cooperative posture by Vietnam with regard to the Southeast Asian course of peace and cooperation—defined as the process of policy coordination in which goal-oriented actors adjust their behaviours to the actual or anticipated preferences of others.[6] Yet, while more adequate and satisfactory answers to these questions have not yet been found, new developments in Vietnam and the rest of Southeast Asia, not to mention those in the rest of the world, keep adding new dimensions to the study of Vietnam's foreign relations.

The end of the Cold War also changed the context of Vietnam's foreign relations with major powers. The Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, effectively terminating the Soviet-Vietnamese alliance officially formed in 1978 with the conclusion of the Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation between Hanoi and Moscow. Relations between Vietnam and China were normalized in 1991 with the two states agreeing not to return to the type of alliance that had existed in the past and was broken by the border war between the two countries in 1979. Besides, the relations between Vietnam and the United States started to improve in the early 1990s. The two countries norma1ized diplomatic and trade relations in 1995 and 2001 respectively although ideological differences and legacies of the Vietnam War still complicated this bilateral relationship.

The impacts on Vietnam's foreign relations in Southeast Asia were curious. On the one hand, Vietnam no longer enjoyed any alliance-type of relations with any major power. On the other hand, it enjoyed a greater freedom in the design and conduct of foreign policy. The absence of constraints imposed by great powers confrontation and détente on smaller states and the relaxation of ideological constraints in world politics following the end of the Cold War suggested that Vietnam and other Southeast Asian states could be freer to follow their nationalist agenda. The region, therefore, would be "ripe for rivalry"[7] because the regional states had traditional suspicions about, and territorial disputes with, each other. But as instability and even hostility became more evident elsewhere, Vietnam acceded to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC), while the process of ASEAN enlargement starting from Vietnam's

membership did facilitate a Zone of Peace in the entirety of Southeast Asia. Since international relations are often about cooperation and conflict, and in general, it has been agreed that states find it difficult to cooperate with one another, the shift of Vietnam to a foreign policy committed to peace and cooperation with its Southeast Asian neighbours in the early 1990s is worth studying. To borrow Milner's words, why nations cooperate with each other is always "the particular empirical puzzle".[8]

The specific puzzle about Vietnam's new cooperative behaviour towards ASEAN also has a theoretical aspect: explanations provided by established international relations theories do not seem totally applicable. Liberals often claim that peace is more likely possible among states with domestic democratic institutions. Vietnam and other Southeast Asian states, however, were not democracies, by Western standards. At the same time, as some of the regional states had been undergoing democratic transformation, the prospect of interstate conflicts in Southeast Asia should become more likely, as critics of democratic peace theory would suggest.[9] Any non-democratic Zone of Peace should, therefore, be an anomaly for democratic peace theorists. What factors have contributed to a "non-democratic" peace in Southeast Asia?

Realists have long argued that cooperation is an anomaly and, if cooperation is materialized, ideology is a weak cause, and balancing power (or common external threat) is the main reason. Therefore, Vietnam-ASEAN cooperation and the non-liberal peace in the region would be justified because the threat of the post-Cold War China looms large. Yet, also from a rational point of view, it would be, historically and practically, too provoking for a small state like Vietnam to consider the giant neighbour as a threat, especially when the very notion of Chinese threat was still problematic. Besides, ASEAN was not a security alliance in the traditional sense; economic cooperation among the members was always modest, and the combination of capabilities of ASEAN as a collective entity was not matching those of China. But Vietnam chose to become a member of ASEAN and found a long-term link between its national security, regime legitimacy, and economic welfare with the cooperative relationship within ASEAN. There must, therefore, be other factors for the country to decide with whom it should align itself and cultivate cooperative relations. I try to seek ways to find these factors.

This book discusses relations between Vietnam and ASEAN from the early 1970s, and the reasons behind the decision made in Hanoi according to which Vietnam joined ASEAN in 1995. Based on Vietnamese documentation, this book attempts to give a fuller account of how leaders in Hanoi had constructed realities, changed their perceptions, and designed foreign policies to establish better relationship with ASEAN and then to join the regional organization in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the socialist bloc. The central argument of this book is simple: There is a strong linkage between the search for a new state identity in the aftermath of the Cold War and the making of foreign policy in Hanoi as well as the linkage between an improved understanding of ASEAN on the part of Hanoi and resultant better Vietnam-ASEAN relations. The search for a new state identity—which was believed to be compatible to that of ASEAN states—informed Hanoi's efforts to forge a closer cooperative relationship with ASEAN states; and similarly, the membership in ASEAN would inform Hanoi's present and future foreign policy.

Process tracing is the main method for this study. By tracing the actual process of decision-making, this method focuses on the collection of evidences showing the actual thinking by the decision-makers in Hanoi about Vietnam's foreign policy, differences (or congruencies) between rhetoric statements on, and actual practices of, Vietnamese foreign policy with regard to ASEAN. In other words, a historical inquiry focusing on process and discourse is central to the method for this study.[10]

Conducting the research, I gained access to various sources that include the followings:

- Secondary sources: published party documents, officials' memoirs; other secondary sources including books, monographs, newspaper and journal articles, etc.
- Primary sources: unpublished documents such as memorandum, political reports, talking points, transcripts of talks, cables sent to or received from Vietnamese embassies abroad, works and situation analyses by foreign ministry's researchers and officials.
- Personal interviews with officials from Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Communist Party of Vietnam Central Committee for External Relations, and Prime Minister's Office.

Access to sources was essential in the research for this book. Although difficulties remain, there has been some progress with regard to access to sources. Both academic and bureaucratic circles in Vietnam have been, for more than three decades, engaged in various types of exchanges with their foreign counterparts. These exchanges will be most important for Vietnamese foreign policy watchers to have a relatively good opportunity to access various kinds of sources. Besides, being a researcher at the Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam (DAV)—which serves as a main teaching and researching body and a think-tank for the Vietnam's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA)—I could have a relatively good chance of accessing various kinds of sources, thanks to my working connections with both academic and official circles who generally considered Vietnam's joining ASEAN a successful case of its foreign policy. Especially for this study, I was indebted to those who were willing to share with me documents of primary sources from the MOFA archives, several MOFA departments' files, and personal collections which were inaccessible to the public.

Apart from gathering data, the research also included a close reading of the available data, comparisons between public records and unpublished documents, and a careful reading of available historical events. I also tried to balance the personal and the widely accepted historical accounts and analysis. Especially, I focused on interviewing officials who were involved in Vietnam-ASEAN relations. These people helped me to interpret the real meaning of documents as well as introduce some of the "behind-the-scene events" that may not be documented as well as to close some possible gaps between what had been said and done.

In fact, as I learned during the course of research, collecting non-public documents and carefully reading them as well as interviewing relevant officials really helped me to get close to the actual thinking of decision-makers. These indeed revealed the perceptions and motivations of the leadership when they made decisions. For example, the data provided clues to Hanoi's perceptions and concerns over external and internal threats, actual thinking about Vietnam as an ASEAN member state, about other ASEAN members, and ASEAN as an organization, thus making it easier to determine how leaders in Hanoi attached importance to Vietnam-ASEAN relations while designing their policy towards ASEAN, how real "the sense of belonging" to the region was, how important ASEAN was

in Hanoi's foreign policy, and what role ASEAN played in the overall mode of political and political developments of Vietnam. In short, this book represents an attempt for a more rigorous search for sources and their interpretation that helps provide a more detailed story of Hanoi's decision to join ASEAN and the Vietnam-ASEAN relationship from which theoretical generalizations may be possible.

It has been widely acknowledged that analysts of international relations and states' foreign policies should employ four independent variables, namely autonomy, welfare, security, and regime maintenance.[11] Findings in this book suggest that state identity should also be another variable to better explain and compare the foreign policy of different states in specific time and space settings.

Notes

1. Keynote speech by PM Nguyen Xuan Phuc at the launching ceremony of Vietnam's 2020 ASEAN Chairmanship on 6 January 2020, at http://news.chinhphu.vn/Home/Keynote-speech-by-PM-Nguyen-Xuan-Phuc-at-launching-ceremony-of-VNs-2020-ASEAN-Chairmanship/20201/38445.vgp
2. Nguyen Manh Cam, "Vietnam's Membership in ASEAN: A Right Decision of History-Making Significance" (Việt Nam tham gia ASEAN – một quyết sách đúng đắn có ý nghĩa lịch sử quan trọng), *Vietnam and the World* (Báo Thế giới và Việt Nam), July 2010.
3. "Prime Minister Phuc Receives ASEAN Secretary General", *People's Daily* (Báo Nhan Dan), 27 August 2019.
4. Communist Party of Vietnam, Drafts of Documents to be submitted to the Thirteenth Congress (Hanoi: Office of the CPV Central Committee, April 2020), p. 52. CPV, *Documents of the Xth, XIth, and XIIth Party Congresses* (Hanoi: National Politics Publishing House, 2001, 2006, and 2011).
5. Dang Cam Tu, "Vietnam in ASEAN: The Past 25 Years and the Way Forward" (Việt Nam trong ASEAN: 25 năm qua và chặng đường phía trước", *Communist Review* 7, no. 321 (July 2020): 8–17. See also Pham Binh Minh, "Việt Nam tham gia ASEAN: 20 năm qua và con đường đi tới" [Vietnam's Participation in ASEAN: The Past 20 Years and Beyond], in *Ngoại giao Việt Nam: Quá trình triển khai đường lối đối ngoại đại hội toàn quốc lần thứ XII của Đảng [Vietnamese Diplomacy: On the Process of Implementation of Foreign Policy Adopted by the Party's XIIth Congresss]*, by Pham Binh Minh (Hanoi: Nhà xuất bản Chính trị Quốc gia, National Political Publishing House 2015),

pp. 149–58, and Nguyen Hung Son, "Việt Nam sau 15 năm là thành viên ASEAN: Hướng tới một Việt Nam chủ động, tích cực, và có trách nhiệm trong ASEAN" [Vietnam after 15 Years in ASEAN: Toward a Proactive and Responsible Member], in *Vietnam's Foreign Policy Orientations toward 2030*, edited by Pham Binh Minh (Hà nội: Nhà xuất bản Chính trị Quốc gia, National Political Publishing House, 2010), pp. 223–36.

6. Robert Keohane, *After Hegemony* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), pp. 51–52.
7. Aaron Friedberg, "Ripe for Rivalry: Prospects for Peace in a Multipolar Asia", *International Security* 18, no. 3 (1995): 5–33.
8. Helen Milner, *Interest, Institutions, and Information: Domestic Politics and International Relations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), p. 5.
9. Jack Snyder, *Voting for Violence: Democratization and Nationalist Conflict* (New York: Norton, 2000).
10. Theoretically, this approach is more sympathetic to constructivism. While realists claim that history does not matter (states have similar interests defined in terms of power, regardless of times and space), constructivists argue, among other things, that history does. See Sorpong Peou, "Realism and Constructivism in Southeast Asian Security Studies today: A Review Essay", *Pacific Review* 15, no. 1 (2002): 121–23.
11. K.J. Holsti, *Change in the International System: Essays on the Theory and Practice of International Relations* (Brookfield, VT: Edward Elgar, 1991), pp. 17–18.