

ASEAN and Vietnam's Security

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Introduction

During 1989–1991, as the communist regimes in Eastern Europe collapsed and the Soviet Union disintegrated, Vietnam lost its great power backer and almost all of its allies. In search of a new security community, Vietnam joined the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 1995. In 2015, ASEAN became a formal security community under the framework of the ASEAN Political-Security Community. However, ASEAN is a security community without the military backup of a military alliance or a great power. This raises the question: How does ASEAN provide for the security of Vietnam? How does Vietnam's ASEAN membership improve its security?

Security has an objective and a subjective dimension. Paramount in the objective dimension of a state's security are issues of war and peace, territorial integrity, and freedom of action (the latter being discussed in the Vietnamese discourse under the terms “independence and sovereignty”).¹

¹These issues are relative, not absolute, and may overlap. Some states, such as the Mongol Empire, may feel the need to wage war constantly in order to preserve freedom of action and territorial integrity. Some others, such as the states of the United States of America, may decide to delegate a large portion of their freedom of action to and join their territory in a federation so they can enjoy more security and prosperity.

In the subjective dimension, Vietnamese leaders typically emphasized regime preservation.

This chapter will examine how and to what extent ASEAN contributes to enhancing Vietnam's security in these four major areas. The overall finding is that ASEAN is a positive but not critical factor in the areas of war and peace, territorial integrity, and regime preservation; more critical in these areas are Vietnam's relations with the great powers. In the area of "independence and sovereignty," ASEAN generates multiple options for Vietnam and is key to strengthening Vietnam's position *vis-à-vis* the great powers. An implication of this finding is that Vietnam must strengthen its ties with the great powers and ASEAN concurrently.

Vietnam's Core Security Interests

Maintaining peace for economic development is the common thread of Vietnamese grand strategy throughout the *doi moi* era, which began in 1986 and is still ongoing. "Maintaining the Peace, Developing the Economy" is the title of the May 1988 Vietnam Communist Party (VCP) Politburo Resolution No. 13, the national security strategy document that laid the foundation for the new Vietnamese foreign policy in the *doi moi* era.² Another seminal national security strategy document, the July 2003 Resolution of the 8th Plenum of the 9th VCP Central Committee, reemphasizes maintaining peace for economic development as the "highest national interest."³ This idea is reiterated in the most recent national

²The full text of this seminal document remains unpublicized but its main tenets have been quoted and explained at length in Nguyen Co Thach, "Tat ca vi hoa binh, doc lap dan toc va phat trien" [All for Peace, National Independence, and Development], *Tap chi Cong san* [Communist review] (August 1989): 1–8; and Nguyen Co Thach, "Nhưng chuyện biến trên thế giới và tư duy mới của chúng ta" [Changes in the World and Our New Thinking], *Quan he Quoc te* [International Relations], No. 3 (January 1990): 2–8. Foreign Minister Nguyen Co Thach was the architect of this national security strategy. For the title and a discussion of the resolution, see Vu Duong Huan, "Ve van de doi moi tu duy trong hoat dong doi ngoai cua Viet Nam" [On the Renovation of Thinking in Vietnam's Foreign Affairs], *Nghien cuu Quoc te* [International Studies], No. 68 (March 2007): 9–19.

³VCP Central Department for Ideology and Culture, *Tai lieu hoc tap Nghi quyet Hoi nghi lan thu Tam Ban chap hanh Trung uong Dang khoa IX* [Documents for Studying the

security strategy, the October 2013 Resolution No. 28 of the 11th VCP Central Committee.⁴

An examination of the most authoritative political documents and statements of key Vietnamese leaders suggests that freedom of action, territorial integrity, and regime preservation are the other core security concerns and interests of Vietnam's ruling elite. These most authoritative documents include the political platform of the VCP, the political report of VCP national congresses, and the VCP Central Committee's and Politburo's resolutions on national security strategy. The VCP Platform is the country's most authoritative political and legal document; according to VCP General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong, even the Constitution is subordinate to the Party Platform.⁵ Regarding the core objectives of national security, both the 1991 and the 2011 VCP Platforms emphasize protecting national independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity, safeguarding the socialist regime, political stability, social order and safety, and crushing all plots and actions of the forces hostile to "our people's revolutionary cause."⁶

Resolution of the Eighth Plenum of the 9th Party Central Committee] (Hanoi: Chinh tri Quoc gia, 2003): 15, 48–49.

⁴The full text of this national security strategy remains unpublicized, but some of its main elements have been explained to the public in several articles written mostly by authors from the military and the security forces. On the central objective of national security as laid out in this strategy document, see Phung Kim Lan, "Giu vung moi truong hoa binh, on dinh de phat trien dat nuoc" [Maintaining a Peaceful and Stable Environment for National Development], *Quan doi Nhan dan* [People's Army] (February 13, 2014). Available at: <http://www.qdnd.vn/qdndsite/vi-vn/61/43/quan-su-quoc-phong/giu-vung-moi-truong-hoa-binh-on-dinh-de-phat-trien-dat-nuoc/287479.html>.

⁵Nguyen Hung, "Tong bi thu: De phong the luc muon xoa bo dieu 4 Hien phap" [General Secretary: Caution Needed to Prevent Forces Wanting to Eliminate the Fourth Article of the Constitution], *VnExpress* (September 28, 2013). Available at: <http://vnexpress.net/tin-tuc/thoi-su/tong-bi-thu-de-phong-the-luc-muon-xoa-bo-dieu-4-hien-phap-2886937.html>.

⁶"Cuong linh xay dung dat nuoc trong thoi ky qua do len chu nghia xa hoi" [Platform for National Construction during the Transitional Period toward Socialism], in Nguyen Trong Phuc, ed., *Tim hieu lich su Dang Cong san Viet Nam qua cac dai hoi va hoi nghi trung uong, 1930–2002* (Hanoi: Lao dong, 2003): 1207–1209; "Cuong linh xay dung dat nuoc trong thoi ky qua do len chu nghia xa hoi (Bo sung va phat trien nam 2011)" [Platform for National Construction during the Transitional Period toward Socialism (Supplemented and Developed in 2011)]. Available at: <http://www.xaydungdang.org.vn/Home/vankientulieu/>

One way to identify Vietnam's main security concerns is to look at authoritative definitions of "Fatherland protection," the concept of national security in Vietnamese parlance. This concept is defined in the Political Report of the 8th VCP Congress in 1996 as "firmly safeguarding the country's independence, security, sovereignty, and territorial integrity, protecting the people, the Party, and the socialist regime."⁷ The later VCP congresses broadened this concept to include elements such as protecting social order, national culture, or the cause of *doi moi*, but independence, sovereignty, territorial integrity and regime preservation consistently remain the core interests.⁸ The July 2003 national security strategy identifies the objectives of national security to be the protection of national independence, sovereignty, unity, and territorial integrity; the security of the VCP, the state, the population, and the socialist regime; the protection of the cause of renovation, industrialization and modernization; the protection of national interests; the maintenance of political security and social order; the protection of the national culture; and the maintenance of peace and stability for socialist national development.⁹ This conception is reiterated in the October 2013 national security strategy.¹⁰

In spite of the tendency to make the content of national security ever more comprehensive, leaders have to prioritize to focus. In a

Van-kien-Dang-Nha-nuoc/2011/3525/CUONG-LINH-XAY-DUNG-DAT-NUOC-TRONG-THOI-KY-QUA-DO-LEN.aspx.

⁷Dang Cong san Viet Nam [Communist Party of Vietnam], *Van kien Dai hoi dai bieu toan quoc lan thu VIII* [Documents of the 8th National Congress] (Hanoi: Chinh tri quoc gia, 1996): 118.

⁸See, for example, Dang Cong san Viet Nam [Communist Party of Vietnam], *Van kien Dai hoi dai bieu toan quoc lan thu IX* [Documents of the 9th Party National Congress] (Hanoi: Chinh tri Quoc gia, 2001): 117.

⁹Ban Tu tuong-Van hoa Trung uong [VCP Central Department for Ideology and Culture], *Tai lieu hoc tap Nghi quyet Hoi nghi lan thu Tam*, 45–46.

¹⁰[Public Security Minister] Tran Dai Quang, "Nam vung quan diem, tu tuong chi dao cua Dang doi voi su nghiep xay dung va bao ve To quoc trong tinh hình moi" [Firmly Holding the Party's Guiding Views on National Construction and Protection in the New Situation], *Cong an Nhan dan* [People's Public Security] (December 31, 2014). Available at: <http://cand.com.vn/thoi-su/Cao-Nam-vung-quan-diem-tu-tuong-chi-dao-cua-dang-doi-voi-su-nghiep-xay-dung-va-bao-ve-to-quoc-trong-tinh-hinh-moi-336423/>.

March 2014 guidance-giving speech to members of the VCP Central Committee, General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong summarized the ruling party's key political goals as "resolutely safeguarding national independence, national sovereignty, and territorial integrity, protecting the Party and the regime, and maintaining a peaceful and stable environment for national development."¹¹ This reflects the consensus view of two different priorities emphasized by Party reformers and conservatives. Indicative of the reformers' focus, the title of an important article by Foreign Minister Nguyen Co Thach reads "All for Peace, Independence, and Development." Conservatives share with reformers the priority of peace and independence, but their ultimate goal is regime preservation. Responding to voters' concerns about China's expansion in the SCS, General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong said, "We have maintained independence and sovereignty, but we must also resolutely preserve the regime, ensure the leadership role of the Party, maintain a peaceful and stable environment for national construction and development, and maintain friendly relations with other countries, including China."¹²

The following sections will examine how ASEAN and Vietnam's membership in ASEAN affect the country's security in the four major areas of war and peace, territorial integrity, regime preservation, and "independence and sovereignty."

¹¹Nguyen Su and Huong Thuy, "Tong Bi thu noi chuyen tai Lop boi duong Uy vien BCH TW Dang" [General Secretary Speaking at the Training Course for Party Central Committee Members], *Dan tri* [Knowledge for the Populace] (March 8, 2014). Available at: <http://dantri.com.vn/xa-hoi/tong-bi-thu-noi-chuyen-tai-lop-boi-duong-uy-vien-bch-tw-dang-1394763142.htm>.

¹²Quoted in Chung Hoang, "Giu doc lap chu quyen, giu cho duoc che do" [Maintain Independence and Sovereignty, Resolutely Preserve the Regime], *VietNamNet* (December 6, 2014). Available at: <http://vietnamnet.vn/vn/chinh-tri/210571/giu-doc-lap-chu-quyen-giu-cho-duoc-che-do.html>; for Trong's emphasis of regime preservation when addressing a domestic issue, see Vu Duy and Van Hieu, "Tong bi thu Nguyen Phu Trong: Chon can bo tai duc phai dua vao dan" [General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong: Selecting Competent and Morally Excellent Cadres Must Rely on the Populace], *VOV.VN* [Voice of Vietnam Radio Website] (December 8, 2015). Available at: <http://vov.vn/chinh-tri/tong-bi-thu-nguyen-phu-trong-chon-can-bo-tai-duc-phai-dua-vao-dan-457577.vov>.

ASEAN and Vietnam's Security Environment

ASEAN was founded in 1967 with the central goal of promoting regional peace and stability.¹³ The group played a major role in ending the Cambodia conflict and creating the post-Cold War regional order in Southeast Asia. The end of the Cambodia conflict probably has no single cause; instead, a number of factors are paramount in causing Vietnam to withdraw from Cambodia and the warring Cambodian factions to abandon the armed conflict. Vietnam's decision to end its intervention in Cambodia has its main root in the adoption during 1986–1988 of a new foreign and security policy.¹⁴ This strategic readjustment resulted primarily from Vietnam's experience of a virtual economic collapse, combined with international isolation, a major change in Soviet foreign policy, and the corresponding reduction of Soviet aid. ASEAN contributed significantly to the isolation of Vietnam and the international pressure on Vietnam to withdraw from Cambodia. However, it is China and the United States that threw the heaviest weight behind this anti-Vietnam campaign. On the other hand, ASEAN's soft power should not be neglected. A comparison with ASEAN's economic development and the appeal of ASEAN's cooperative norms had certainly played a role in convincing some key Vietnamese leaders to discard their old and adopt ASEAN's vision of the region. As then Deputy Foreign Minister Tran Quang Co said, "We would like to have the same fate as other Southeast Asian countries — independence, peace, and stability."¹⁵

ASEAN has an impressive record of intra-group peace. The nearly five decades since its inception saw no war among its members, although war among some of its neighbors did occur. Is ASEAN the primary cause of the absence of war among its members? A look at the near-miss case of the Cambodian–Thai border conflict (2008–2011) can shed some light on this question. Apart from a rejected offer of assistance and a short monitoring role by Indonesia, ASEAN as a group and most of its members did

¹³Bangkok Declaration (1967).

¹⁴Tran Quang Co, *Hồi ức và suy nghĩ* [Remembrances and Reflections], unpublished memoirs (2001–2003).

¹⁵Quoted in Sheldon Simon, "Vietnam's Security: Between China and ASEAN," *Asian Affairs* 20(4) (Winter, 1994): 187–204, here 187.

little to end the conflict. Did the ASEAN membership of both Thailand and Cambodia prevent this conflict from getting worse? It is possible that an in-group feeling and/or the group norms have had some invisible effect. But it is easier to explain the conflict as a diversionary effect of domestic politics in both countries. By the same token, it is easier to explain ASEAN's long peace by referring to the convergence of focus on domestic politics among its members, rather than by referring to group norms or identity. In fact, group norms and identity need a long time to be internalized, while the focus on domestic politics was one of the major reasons for which the ASEAN members joined the group. Still, ASEAN can play an important role by helping to reduce the security dilemma among its members.

From Vietnam's perspective, maintaining peace among the ASEAN members is far less important than preventing war or armed conflict in which Vietnam is directly involved. In the post-Cold War era, the chance of such conflicts between Vietnam and any other Southeast Asian states is negligible. Maintaining a special and close relationship with Vietnam, Laos has no reason to engage in such a conflict. Armed clashes with a Cambodia ruled by an anti-Vietnamese government backed by China are possible, but this is unlikely until Cambodia has an anti-Vietnamese government, and ASEAN has little influence on Cambodia's domestic politics. In Vietnam's relations with the other regional states, territorial and maritime disputes have the largest potential of all to grow into an armed conflict. However, there is very little chance for the maritime disputes with Thailand or Indonesia to cause a major armed clash, while the Philippines and Malaysia have little intention to invade islands they claim but are occupied by Vietnam in the SCS. This relatively peaceful environment existed before Vietnam joined ASEAN, thus if it is an effect of ASEAN, most likely through the ASEAN norms, it is a public good that Vietnam can enjoy without membership in the group.

In the post-Cold War era, Vietnam's largest fear of invasion is related to China and the United States. These fears vary greatly among the Vietnamese. While modernizers tend to be more wary of China, anti-Westerners tend to be more suspicious of the United States.¹⁶ Led by

¹⁶For a discussion of Vietnam's ruling elite being divided into modernizers and anti-Westerners, as well as for their views of China and the United States, see Alexander L.

anti-Westerners, the Vietnamese military has never ruled out the possibility of a US invasion. As late as 2012, Defense Minister Phung Quang Thanh and Chief of the Vietnam People's Army General Political Directorate Ngo Xuan Lich still warned about the danger of an American invasion to overthrow the Hanoi regime "when the opportunity arises."¹⁷ While it is debatable whether this possibility is really significant, the fear appears to be genuine. It neatly fits into the anti-Western worldview and is based on anti-Westerners' perception of the post-Cold War US military interventions that led to regime change in Yugoslavia, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya.¹⁸ Clearly, Vietnam's membership in ASEAN does not significantly allay this fear.

While all modernizers and many moderates do not share the anti-Westerners' fear of a US invasion, most Vietnamese elite do not rule out the possibility of a Chinese invasion. Vietnam's membership in ASEAN certainly will give China more reasons to think carefully before launching an attack on Hanoi, but ASEAN is too weak for Vietnam to rely on. ASEAN is militarily unable to deter China or defend Vietnam from Chinese aggression. ASEAN also has little economic and structural leverage to restrain China. ASEAN has tried to socialize China into a system of peaceful norms, but recent Chinese actions in the SCS are clear

Vuving, "How Experience and Identity Shape Vietnam's Relations with China and the United States," in *Asia's Middle Powers: The Identity and Regional Policy of South Korea and Vietnam*, eds. Joon-Woo Park, Gi-Wook Shin and Donald W. Keyser (Stanford, CA: Shorenstein APARC, Stanford University, 2013): 53–71.

¹⁷Phung Quang Thanh, "Khong de dat nuoc bi dong, bat ngo ve chien luoc" [Don't Let Our Country Be Surprised Strategically], *VnExpress* (December 19, 2012). Available at: <http://vnexpress.net/tin-tuc/thoi-su/khong-de-dat-nuoc-bi-dong-bat-ngo-ve-chien-luoc-2403939.html>; Ngo Xuan Lich, "Gia tri to lon cua yeu to chinh tri, tinh than" [The Great Value of the Political and Mental Factors], *Quan doi Nhan dan* [People's Army] (December 18, 2012). Available at: <http://www.qdnd.vn/qdndsite/vi-vn/61/43/chinh-tri/gia-tri-to-lon-cua-nhan-to-chinh-tri-tinh-than/220898.html>.

¹⁸See, for example, Vien Khoa hoc Xa hoi Nhan van Quan su [Institute of Military Social Sciences and Humanity], *Bao ve To quoc trong tinh hình moi: Mot so van de ly luan va thuc tien* [Fatherland Protection in the New Situation: Some Theoretical and Practical Issues], internal circulation (Hanoi: Quan doi Nhan dan, 2003); Vien Khoa hoc Xa hoi Nhan van Quan su, *Bao ve To quoc trong tinh hình moi* [Fatherland Protection in the New Situation] (Hanoi: Chinh tri Quoc gia, 2014).

manifestations of ASEAN's failure in this regard. Vietnam is aware of ASEAN's weakness. ASEAN's role in Vietnam's strategy toward China can be characterized as "second among equals." Maintaining peace with China is a paramount element in Vietnamese foreign policy, and to address this issue, Vietnam is pursuing a kitchen-sink strategy. In this strategy, Vietnam relies more on its own defense capabilities, its accommodation of China, its relationships with the other great powers, and the counter-weight of the United States.¹⁹

ASEAN and Vietnam's Territorial Integrity

Major challenges to Vietnam's territorial integrity in the post-Cold War era come from territorial and maritime disputes with neighbors. There are groups advocating a separate state for the indigenous peoples of the Central Highlands of Vietnam and the "return" of Southern Vietnam to Cambodia, but they are too weak to be a significant force of separatism. While Vietnam has no major border disputes with Laos (a Lao–Vietnamese border treaty was signed in 1977), it has settled a half of its border disputes in the last 25 years. In 1997, Vietnam and Thailand signed an agreement delimiting their maritime border. In 1999 and 2000, respectively, Vietnam and China inked treaties to delineate their land border and their maritime boundary in the Gulf of Tonkin. An agreement to determine the continental shelf boundary with Indonesia was signed in 2003. Although Vietnam's maritime border with Malaysia is still subject to dispute, in 1992 the two countries agreed to a joint development zone in the Gulf of Thailand, and in 2009, they jointly submitted their extended continental shelf claims in the SCS. Vietnam also has outstanding disputes with the Philippines and Malaysia over the Spratly Islands, but the three

¹⁹Alexander L. Vuving, "Power Rivalry, Party Crisis, and Patriotism: New Dynamics in the Vietnam–China–US Triangle," in *New Dynamics in U.S.–China Relations: Contending for the Asia-Pacific*, eds. Li Mingjiang and Kalyan M. Kemburi (New York: Routledge, 2015): 270–282; Vuving, "Strategy and Evolution of Vietnam's China Policy"; Alexander L. Vuving, "Vietnam, the US, and Japan in the South China Sea," *The Diplomat* (November 26, 2014). Available at: <http://thediplomat.com/2014/11/vietnam-the-us-and-japan-in-the-south-china-sea/>.

countries largely respect the status quo, and they did so well before the DoC of the Parties in the SCS was signed in 2002. ASEAN played no direct role helping the parties to resolve these disputes. Arguably, ASEAN membership would have caused the ASEAN members to treat each other more respectfully than otherwise, but the impact in matters of border disputes is not evident.²⁰

The largest challenges to Vietnam's territorial integrity in the post-Cold War era are the border and SCS disputes with China. As I have explained elsewhere, the settlement of the Sino-Vietnamese disputes over the land border and the maritime boundary in the Gulf of Tonkin resulted from a "grand strategic fit" combined with a "power shift" between the two states. This power shift involved Vietnam's improved position *vis-à-vis* China as Hanoi demonstrated that "it was willing and able to utilize the clout of America and ASEAN to deter China."²¹

ASEAN has played an overall positive but not critical and sometimes counterproductive role in Vietnam's disputes with China over the islands and waters in the SCS. ASEAN's role was more positive in the 1990s and early 2000s, but it became somewhat counterproductive in recent years. Nevertheless, the situation would have been worse for Vietnam had it not been an ASEAN member. An examination of ASEAN's response to the major Sino-Vietnamese altercations in the post-Cold War era will illustrate this point.

In February 1992, China promulgated a "Law on the Territorial Sea and the Continuous Zone" that explicitly claims as Chinese territory the disputed islands in the SCS.²² In May, Beijing took a further step by awarding a large exploration block, the "Wanan Bei" (Vietnamese

²⁰When Vietnam joined ASEAN, it was hoped that "Membership would make it easier for Vietnam to settle its disagreements with other ASEAN members." Hoang Anh Tuan, "Vietnam's Membership in ASEAN: Economic, Political, and Security Implications," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 16(3) (December 1994): 265.

²¹Alexander L. Vuving, "Grand Strategic Fit and Power Shift: Explaining Turning Points in China-Vietnam Relations," in *Living with China: Regional States and China through Crises and Turning Points*, eds. Shiping Tang, Mingjiang Li and Amitav Acharya (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009): 229–246.

²²A full text of this law can be found at: <http://www.asianlii.org/cn/legis/cen/laws/lotprocottsatz739/>.

"Tu Chinh"), which lies deep south and on the Vietnamese continental shelf, to an American oil company. Meeting in July in Manila, the ASEAN foreign ministers issued a declaration on the SCS, calling for restraint by all parties and for the establishment of a code of conduct.²³ This declaration is ASEAN's first ever on the dispute, and it was made at a time when Vietnam, along with Laos, was just granted observer status in the group.

Two years after Vietnam joined ASEAN, Sino-Vietnamese tensions rose to a new height following China's deployment, on March 7, 1997, of the mobile oil platform Kantan-III and two pilot ships to drill for oil in Vietnam's Block 113, an area Hanoi considered its EEZ at the mouth of the Tonkin Gulf. After an ineffective protest, Vietnam summoned the ASEAN ambassadors to explain its position. According to an ASEAN diplomat, Hanoi was trying to convince fellow ASEAN members that "if China behaves this way to Vietnam, it could behave the same way towards [them]." In response, a senior ASEAN official reportedly noted, "We do not recognize any Chinese rights to Vietnam's continental shelf, nor do we recognize the right of the Chinese to do the way they did. Now we're all in this together."²⁴ In a further act of solidarity, Philippine Undersecretary of Foreign Affairs Rodolfo Severino publicly said that his government "is very much concerned over China's reported oil exploration on the Vietnamese continental shelf."²⁵ On 22 March, Vietnam hosted the commander of US forces in the Pacific, Admiral Joseph Prueher, who was the highest ranking US military official to visit the country since renormalization. On 1 April, China withdrew its oil rig and vessels and agreed to resolve the problem with Vietnam through consultation. Vietnam's ASEAN and US cards appear to yield fruits.

²³A full text of this declaration can be found at: <http://cil.nus.edu.sg/1992/1992-asean-declaration-on-the-south-china-sea-signed-on-22-july-1992-in-manila-philippines-by-the-foreign-ministers/>.

²⁴Michael Vatikiotis, "Drawn into the Fray," *Far Eastern Economic Review* (April 3, 1997): 14.

²⁵*Business World* (March 31, 1997), cited in David Wurfel, "Between China and ASEAN: The Dialectics of Recent Vietnamese Foreign Policy," in *Vietnamese Foreign Policy in Transition*, eds. Carlyle A. Thayer and Ramses Amer (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1999): 160.

After a decade of relative calm, tensions in the SCS erupted again starting in the late 2000s. This time, however, ASEAN is less united in throwing its collective weight behind the front-line members. In July 2012, the group failed, for the first time in its 45-year history, to issue a joint communiqué as Cambodia, the year's ASEAN chair, refused to release a statement that would implicitly criticize China for two incidents in the SCS.²⁶ One of these incidents was ongoing at that time, with China denying the Philippines access to the Scarborough Shoal, which lies well within the Philippine EEZ. The other incident occurred in June, when China invited international bids for 9 oil and gas blocks that lie within Vietnam's EEZ.

Two years later, between May and July 2014, China installed its super oil rig HYSY-981 to drill in waters lying within Vietnam's EEZ. This sparked the worst crisis in Sino-Vietnamese relations since 1988. The ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting in August under Myanmar's chairmanship issued a joint communiqué expressing the group's "serious concerns" over "recent developments which had increased tensions in the SCS" and stressing "the importance of maintaining peace, stability, maritime security as well as freedom of navigation in and over-flight above the SCS."²⁷

The next year, ASEAN was more forthright in its "shaming but not naming" strategy toward China. At the same time, however, it also made public some cracks in its internal unity. The August 2015 joint communiqué of the ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting stated, "We took note of the serious concerns expressed by some Ministers on the land reclamation in the SCS, which have eroded trust and confidence, increased tensions and may undermine peace, security, and stability in the SCS."²⁸

²⁶For a detailed report of what happened, see Carlyle A. Thayer, "ASEAN'S Code of Conduct in the South China Sea: A Litmus Test for Community-Building?," *The Asia-Pacific Journal* 10(34/4) (August 20, 2012).

²⁷See the full text of this communiqué at <http://www.asean.org/news/asean-statement-communicues/item/joint-communique-47th-asean-foreign-ministers-meeting>.

²⁸See the full text of this communiqué at <http://www.asean.org/news/asean-statement-communicues/item/joint-communique-48th-asean-foreign-ministers-meeting-kuala-lumpur-malaysia-4th-august-2015>.

While ASEAN serves as a forum for Vietnam to mobilize international pressure on China, the group was not among Vietnam's most ardent supporters. If the recent tensions are the litmus test to identify who sides with whom, it was the United States and Japan that stood out as the staunchest friends Vietnam has in its discord with China.²⁹ ASEAN's responses in recent years are also occasionally counterproductive. As the low levels of resolve and unity became apparent in these responses, they only convince China that it can divide and rule.

ASEAN and Vietnam's Regime Security

When Vietnam deliberated its possible membership in ASEAN, the main concern regarding regime security was the group's possible interference to change Vietnam's communist regime. Although ASEAN advocated non-interference in the domestic affairs of its members, Vietnam's conservatives also saw ASEAN as having another, Western, face. The fear was that being a part of the Western-led international system ASEAN could support the perceived US strategy of "peaceful evolution," acting as a back door or a proxy in Washington's perceived scheme of overthrowing the Communist Party rule.

Despite this fear, Vietnam opted for an accelerated accession into the regional group. Nguyen Vu Tung explains this as the result of a change in Vietnamese leaders' perception of ASEAN. He argues that through learning and interaction, including high-level visits by conservative leaders to ASEAN countries, Vietnamese leaders changed their perception of ASEAN from one that stresses difference to one that emphasizes similarity. From a perception of ASEAN as anti-communist, Vietnamese leaders now understood that "in spite of their different political systems, the Vietnamese and ASEAN governments shared a common goal: keeping the ruling regime in power." As Tung reports, Vietnamese leaders confided that "the ASEAN countries are more similar to us than we had thought" and "ASEAN political documents and cooperative projects have proved that ASEAN is not an anti-communist military alliance and the ASEAN countries' objectives in terms of nation-building and external relations are

²⁹Vuving, "Vietnam, the US, and Japan in the South China Sea."

80% similar to ours.”³⁰ This common goal also has the implication that, like Vietnam, ASEAN is uninterested in changing the political regime of its neighbors. ASEAN, indeed, has never tried to change Vietnam’s communist regime; nor has it supported Western pressure on human rights, freedoms, and democracy, a policy that would undermine Vietnam’s communist regime.

Vietnam also saw benefits to regime security from ASEAN membership. Writing in the year prior to Vietnam’s accession into ASEAN, Deputy Foreign Minister Vu Khoan, who was in charge of ASEAN affairs at the time, asserted, “ASEAN has become an actor of significant standing in international affairs, which has its own voice in multiple issues, including the protection of sovereignty, issues related to economic interests, and human rights issues.”³¹ This hinted at the possibility that, as an ASEAN member, Hanoi can seek security in numbers and leverage the group in resisting Western pressure and interference in matters related to human rights and democracy. In actuality, Vietnam’s membership in ASEAN has had little impact on the intensity of Western pressure on human rights, freedoms, and democracy. In fact, the United States has criticized not only Vietnam, but also other, older ASEAN members for what Washington views as violation of human rights and democratic principles. Still, what ASEAN membership does benefit Hanoi in this regard is a sense of comfort and a boost in self-confidence.

Nguyen Huu Quyet argues that Hanoi saw yet another means of protection provided by ASEAN, “when any major powers, including the US, accede to the TAC — the key treaty of ASEAN in managing and codifying external powers’ relations with ASEAN, they would be bound by the ASEAN norms and principles contained in the treaty, particularly the principle of ‘non-intervention’.”³² Absent real US intentions of (re)-intervening in Vietnam, ASEAN’s ability to protect Vietnam, to any extent,

³⁰Nguyen Vu Tung, “Vietnam’s Membership of ASEAN: A Constructivist Interpretation,” *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 29(3) (2007): 483–505, quotations in 491, 494.

³¹Vu Khoan, “Viet Nam va ASEAN” [Vietnam and ASEAN], *Tap chi Cong san* [Communist Review] (November 1993): 28–31.

³²Nguyen Huu Quyet, “Vietnam’s ASEAN Strategic Objectives since the 1986 Doi Moi Reform,” dissertation, National Graduate Institute for Policy Studies (2013): 42. Quyet cited two articles in the *Tap chi Cong san* to back this view.

through Vietnam's membership, US participation in the TAC, or the group's actions, in case of US intervention remains highly hypothetical and is a red herring of sort. In any event, as alluded in a previous section, Vietnamese leaders who believed in the possibility of US intervention in Vietnam did not regard ASEAN or the ASEAN norms and treaties as a tool to ward off what they fear as US intervention. Nowhere in the Vietnamese strategists' discussion of strategies to "protect the Fatherland" has ASEAN or its normative regime been mentioned as a tool for the protection of the regime.³³

ASEAN and Vietnam's Freedom of Action

An inter-governmental and not a supra-national organization, ASEAN does not require its members to delegate part of their sovereignty to the group. Its foundational principles, which include non-interference and consensus-based decision-making, are designed to preserve member states' independence and sovereignty.³⁴ When Vietnam deliberated its possible membership in ASEAN, its leaders focused acutely on whether membership would negatively affect Vietnam's independence and autonomy. The final decision to join the group was made after the VCP Politburo concluded that membership in ASEAN would help to "preserve our national independence and autonomy."³⁵ Twenty-one years later,

³³See, for example, Vien Khoa hoc Xa hoi Nhan van Quan su [Institute of Military Social Sciences and Humanity], *Bao ve To quoc trong tinh hình mới: Một số vấn đề lý luận và thực tiễn* [Fatherland Protection in the New Situation: Some Theoretical and Practical Issues], internal circulation (Hanoi: Quan doi Nhan dan, 2003); Vien Khoa hoc Xa hoi Nhan van Quan su, *Bao ve To quoc trong tinh hình mới* [Fatherland Protection in the New Situation] (Hanoi: Chinh tri Quoc gia, 2014).

³⁴These principles do not automatically translate into reality. Some authors have argued that ASEAN did veer away from its non-interference principle and "intervene in Burma's internal affairs." See Ruukun Katanyuu, "Beyond Non-Interference in ASEAN: The Association's Role in Myanmar's National Reconciliation and Democratization," *Asian Survey* 46(6) (November/December 2006): 825–845.

³⁵Vu Duong Ninh, "Quan he Viet Nam–ASEAN trong thế kỷ 20" [Vietnam–ASEAN Relations in the 20th century], *Nghien cuu Dong Nam A* [Southeast Asian Studies] (July 2000): 14–21.

a Vietnamese official observed, “given ASEAN’s principles of non-interference and consensus, every member has a de facto veto right.”³⁶ ASEAN can also enhance its member states’ independence and autonomy *vis-à-vis* actors outside the group. ASEAN is no great power, and given its economic and military power, it cannot act as a counterweight to any great power. Nevertheless, the regional organization can greatly enlarge its members’ freedom of action by generating more options for its members. In creating options for its members, ASEAN serves, metaphorically speaking, as a “bridge,” a “ladder,” a “shelter,” and a “megaphone.”

As a “bridge,” ASEAN provides through its meetings and linkages additional, sometimes unique, opportunities and channels for contact and cooperation, as well as access to markets, investment, and assistance that may not be obtainable without membership. One of the main interests Vietnam had in joining ASEAN was to benefit from the agreements and assistance given by ASEAN’s dialogue partners.³⁷ Most of ASEAN’s dialogue partners were advanced industrial Western countries, to which Vietnam had difficulties to access. Most recently, reviewing 20 years of Vietnam’s ASEAN membership, Foreign Minister Pham Binh Minh observed, “ASEAN membership status has provided favorable conditions for Vietnam to enlarge and strengthen relations with partners outside ASEAN, especially the major powers, as well as to participate more intensively and extensively in the larger international or inter-regional cooperation frameworks.”³⁸ Minh also noted that Vietnam was able to gain more favorable access to markets, investment, and trade opportunities in and outside the region through the intra-ASEAN economic linkages and ASEAN’s free trade agreements. In addition, membership in ASEAN has provided Vietnam with opportunities to obtain information, knowledge,

³⁶Personal communication (December 4, 2015).

³⁷Personal communication with Kavi Chongkittavorn, who, as a special assistant to the ASEAN General Secretary at the time, was privy to the conversation between the ASEAN Secretariat and Vietnam when the country prepared for joining the organization in the earlier half of the 1990s (December 15, 2015).

³⁸Pham Binh Minh, “Viet Nam luôn vì mục tiêu xây dựng Cộng đồng ASEAN gắn kết” [Vietnam is Always for the Building of an United ASEAN Community], *Vietnam Plus* (July 28, 2015). Available at: <http://www.vietnamplus.vn/viet-nam-luon-vi-muc-tieu-xay-dung-cong-dong-asean-gan-ket/334915.vnp>.

and skills that are useful for Vietnam's capacity building and international integration.³⁹ Unlike the old members, for Vietnam, membership in ASEAN has served as a key bridge to the world outside. Being isolated internationally and on adversarial terms with the surrounding region and the West for decades, Vietnam entered the post-Cold War world without a secure lane to go and a corresponding sense of self-confidence. ASEAN membership has provided precisely this.⁴⁰

ASEAN can also serve as a "ladder" to elevate its members' international role and standing and improve their bargaining position *vis-à-vis* other international actors, thereby generating options that may not be available without membership. In the 1990s, ASEAN membership helped to lift Vietnam dramatically from its previous status as an international pariah. Vietnamese officials often regard their country's accession into ASEAN as a major breakthrough in the country's effort to break free from isolation in the late 20th century. Vietnam has leveraged its ASEAN membership in relations with countries outside the region. For example, Vietnam often offered itself to be a "bridge" for Russia and the Eastern European states to access the ASEAN market. Through its various forums and mechanisms, ASEAN also provides Vietnam with an additional and unique channel to interact with China, opening up more options for Vietnam to deal with its giant neighbor. In a recent interview, Foreign Minister Pham Binh Minh noted that ASEAN membership has significantly improved Vietnam's bargaining position *vis-à-vis* its dialogue partners and the major powers.⁴¹ With ASEAN's leadership role in regional affairs, Vietnam's membership in ASEAN also enhances the country's strategic value in the regional policy of the great powers. US Secretary of

³⁹Pham Binh Minh, "Viet Nam luôn vì mục tiêu xây dựng Cộng đồng ASEAN gắn kết."

⁴⁰See Foreign Minister Pham Binh Minh, "20 năm qua và chặng đường sắp tới" [The Past 20 Years and the Road Ahead], *The giới và Viet Nam* [The World and Vietnam] (July 27, 2015). Available at: <http://www.baomoi.com/20-nam-qua-va-chang-duong-sap-toi/c/17142490.epi>.

⁴¹Hoang Thi Hoa, "Viet Nam gia nhap ASEAN: Dot pha dau tien trong tien trinh hoi nhap" [Vietnam Joining ASEAN: The First Breakthrough in the Integration Process], interview with Foreign Minister Pham Binh Minh, *Vietnam Plus* (July 27, 2015). Available at: <http://www.vietnamplus.vn/viet-nam-gia-nhap-asean-dot-pha-dau-tien-trong-tien-trinh-hoi-nhap/334913.vnp>.

State Hillary Clinton famously declared in 2010, “We view ASEAN as a fulcrum for the region’s emerging regional architecture. And we see it as indispensable on a host of political, economic, and strategic matters.”⁴² As a member with a *de facto* veto right and an occasional leadership role in ASEAN, Vietnam is certainly attributed an added value in US regional strategy. ASEAN’s centrality in the regional architecture also provides Vietnam with unique opportunities to shape the regional, even the international, order. As the 2010 Chair of ASEAN, Vietnam was invited to the G-20 summits in Toronto and Seoul, and was consulted in the preparation process.⁴³

ASEAN can function as a “shelter” for its members both *vis-à-vis* fellow members and *vis-à-vis* external powers. With its inoffensive principles and the “ASEAN Way,” it provides a protective mechanism against coercion from the Southeast Asian neighbors. However, ASEAN’s role as a “shelter” is most pronounced in relations with major powers. As a senior Indonesian official noted, “ASEAN is our only insurance” against being squeezed between major powers.⁴⁴ This is even truer in the case of Vietnam. Vietnam entered the post-Cold War era with a great challenge. Having lost its major allies and great power backer after the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe and the disintegration of the Soviet Union, Vietnam found itself alone facing two major powers, each of which posed a threat to Vietnam’s perceived security in a different way. While China threatened Vietnam’s territorial security with its SCS policy, the United States challenged Vietnam’s regime security with its human rights policy.

⁴²Hillary Rodham Clinton, “America’s Engagement in the Asia-Pacific,” remarks at Kahala Hotel, Honolulu (October 28, 2010). Available at: <http://www.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2010/10/150141.htm>.

⁴³Andrew Cooper, “The G-20 and regional Dynamics,” in *Global Leadership in Transition: Making the G-20 More Effective and Responsible*, eds. Colin Bradford and Wonhyuk Lim (Washington, DC: Korean Development Institute and The Brookings Institution, 2011): 265–274.

⁴⁴Quoted in *U.S. Alliances and Emerging Partnerships in Southeast Asia: Out of the Shadow*, a Report of the CSIS Southeast Asia Initiative (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, July 2009): 53. Available at: http://csis.org/files/publication/090710_southeast_asia_alliances_partnerships.pdf.

Without ASEAN membership, Vietnam could have been easily isolated by the two great powers.

ASEAN's role as a "megaphone" for its members works in two inter-related ways. A member can take advantage of ASEAN's forums to amplify, and by having other members to support it in an issue, even multiply its voice. Through ASEAN's forums, the member can also multilateralize a problem it has or a challenge it faces with a third party, which can be an outside state or a fellow member. ASEAN has served as a "megaphone" for Vietnam in many issues, the most strategic of which is the SCS dispute. In the words of one Vietnamese official, "ASEAN is a forum where Vietnam can engage all major powers in the region in order to prevent conflicts and peacefully manage disputes, particularly the SCS disputes."⁴⁵ As analyzed in a previous section, ASEAN's response to Chinese assertiveness in the SCS has recently been occasionally counter-productive. However, Vietnam has no better "megaphone" than ASEAN among all the international forums.

Conclusion

Vietnam has benefited greatly from ASEAN (as a public good) and its membership in ASEAN (as a group good). ASEAN has significantly improved Vietnamese security in the four major areas related to war and peace, territorial integrity, regime security and freedom of action. ASEAN is a major factor contributing to the maintenance of a peaceful and stable regional environment, which Vietnam views as its "highest national interest." However, most of the added value generated by ASEAN in this regard is a public good that Vietnam can enjoy without membership. Also, it is the great powers, not ASEAN, who hold the key to matters of war and peace in the region. ASEAN has also significantly enhanced Vietnam's ability in safeguarding its territorial integrity. However, ASEAN sometimes acted counterproductively, and is not Vietnam's best partner in this matter. With regard to regime security, ASEAN's positive role is that the group does not criticize Vietnam's communist regime, but nor does ASEAN provide an effective protective mechanism against international

⁴⁵Personal communication (December 4, 2015).

pressure on the regime. Of the four major areas of security, the area where ASEAN excels in helping Vietnam is that of freedom of action. Vietnam's membership in ASEAN has opened up a host of opportunities for Vietnam. ASEAN was a critical "bridge" for Vietnam to join the world. It also greatly strengthened Vietnam's position *vis-à-vis* other countries, most importantly the major powers, and served as a "shelter" against being squeezed between great powers. ASEAN's forums are the best available among the international organizations where Vietnam can amplify and multiply its voice in strategic issues. They are also the best available for Vietnam to multilateralize some of its bilateral issues with more powerful parties. In sum, ASEAN is a weak reed for Vietnam to rely on, but it is an excellent option generator that Vietnam will ignore at its own peril.