

## VIETNAM-ASEAN INTEGRATION: PROCESS AND PRESENT SITUATION (1967-2002)

Vu Duong Ninh<sup>1)</sup>

This article is the summary of one chapter in a research project which is entitled *Vietnam-ASEAN Integration: Process, Present Situation, and Problems* (Code QG.TĐ. 00 02) and which was evaluated and approved in June, 2002.

This chapter analyzes the Vietnam-ASEAN relationship in two stages: from the birth of ASEAN up to the time when Vietnam joined the association (1967-1995) and from the time Vietnam officially became a member of the Association (1995) up to now. Based on the analysis, some proposals and solutions will be raised.

### 1. The first stage: 1967 –1995

When ASEAN first came into being, it included 5 countries, namely Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand. In reality, the Northeast Asian countries joining ASEAN encountered difficult and complicated situations brought about by the Vietnam War.

Jusuf Wanandi, a scholar at the Research Centre for International Strategies in Calcutta (Indonesia) comments: "The birth of ASEAN could be seen as a response to the Vietnam

War, which had no sign of ending, and as a need for the non-communist countries in Southeast Asia to face with the possibility that America would withdraw its troops from the region.

So it can be said that in effect ASEAN was a product made by some Northeast ASEAN countries at a heating time in the region in the time of the Cold War in the world. Vietnam was an objective factor affecting the formation of ASEAN and was also the major object to be considered in ASEAN's behaviour for a long period of time. Through 28 years of Vietnam-ASEAN relationship (1967-1995), the following comments can be made:

First, the occurrence of ASEAN was a product of the Cold War in the Southeast Asia. It reflected the conflict between the national liberation campaign and imperialism; it also reflected the conflict between the camp of socialism and that of capitalism in the region. ASEAN did not appear in a simple or one-direction way because the member countries of ASEAN had different degrees of involvement with imperialism and their motives for escaping from the tie of imperialism were

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<sup>1)</sup> Professor, Department of International Studies, College of Social Science & Humanities, VNU

different. Even in the revolutionary campaign in Indochina after the America's withdrawal from Southeast Asia, conflicts among the communist parties of China and Cambodia with that of Vietnam arose due to the help of Vietnam to liberate Cambodia from the domination yoke under the genocidal regime of the Khmer Rouge and due to the collision in the North border of Vietnam in 1979. The period of tense opposition between the Indochinese revolutionary force and the ASEAN countries (backed by China and America respectively) was taking place very fiercely in the first half of the 1980s.

Second, the tendency of conciliation between 2 superpowers, the Soviet Union and the USA, influenced the world's situation. In Southeast Asia, due to the need of stability for development, the countries belonging to the ASEAN bloc and to the Indochinese bloc wanted peace and security but the knot of the problem was the situation in Cambodia. After the problem of Cambodia was solved in the spirit of national reconciliation and concord, the situation in Southeast Asia was improved, and the countries moved more closely towards one another, as the result of which, Vietnam and Laos attended the Bali Treaty in July, 1992. That event officially opened the period for Vietnam to prepare to enter ASEAN and the result of the event was the joining ceremony in July, 1995 in the capital of Brunei.

Third, from 1967 to 1995, the Vietnam-ASEAN relationship went up and down. However, in the second half of the 1980s and

the first half of the 1990s, this relationship turned in a positive direction. Many factors affected the development of this relationship. As for Vietnam, the Vietnamese Communist Party's Renovation (Doi Moi) Line in general and renovation in external relations in particular were the decisive factors. With the active and principled use of the Renovation Line, we basically improved the regional as well as the global relations. As a result of that improvement, we did overcome many difficulties brought about by the changes of the socialist countries in Europe, escape from the situation of being isolated in the 1980s, and cautiously integrate into the region and the world. These achievements created a steady foundation of the following integration process on the international scale.

Fourth, to the ASEAN countries, it is important to find out mutual benefits in building an area of peace, stability, cooperation, and development. On the one hand, differences diversify the development, following the motor "Union in diversity; on the other hand, they certainly create conflicts of sovereignty and interests. Practical experience has shown that if the countries in the region see that the mutual benefits are basic, lasting, appropriate to the tendency of the age of regionalization and globalization, then obstacles can be reduced step by step in the spirit of mutual respect and the good will to reach a higher and further goal: making the Southeast Asia an area of peace, development, and prosperity and uniting the Southeast Asian peoples in the association to head for concord,

friendship, mutual aid, and co-operation. In that sense, the fact that Vietnam joined ASEAN marked a new phase in the development of ASEAN in the last years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the first years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century

## 2. The second stage: from 1995 up to now

After becoming the seventh member of ASEAN, Vietnam has actively taken part in different activities of the association: attending the fifth Summit Meeting in Bangkok in December, 1995, the first Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) in Thailand in March, 1996 (and ASEM 2 in Britain in 1998, ASEM 3 in North Korea in 2000). Vietnam successfully held the sixth ASEM Summit Meeting in December, 1998, which is one of the specially important meetings in the history of ASEAN development. At this meeting, the Hanoi Declaration, the Hanoi Action Programme and many other important documents were passed so as to realize "ASEAN Vision 2002". Also at this meeting, the governors of ASEAN countries accepted Cambodia as the tenth member of the association, which finished the plan of enlarging the organization to cover the whole region. The success of the fifth Summit Meeting affirmed the importance of Vietnam in Southeast Asia.

After the fifth Summit Meeting, Vietnam was appointed to be the chairman of the ASEAN Standing Committee (ASC) and ARF in the term of office 2000-2001. Vietnam also successfully held the 34<sup>th</sup> Asian Foreign

Ministers' Meeting and the eighth ARF Meeting in July 2001. Through these activities, Vietnam could prove its organization ability, contribute to setting the internal problems of the association, and, together with other member countries, contribute to the growth of ASEAN, heightening the position of ASEAN as well as that of Vietnam in the world's politics.

Looking back on the integration process of Vietnam as a member of ASEAN in the period, the following comments can be made:

Firstly, Vietnam's integration into ASEAN was done favourably, with the agreement from 6 member countries and the support of the world's opinion. Vietnam's contribution to the process of development of ASEAN after the Cold War has responded to Vietnam's position in the association. After becoming the seventh member of ASEAN, not only has Vietnam kept its commitment but it has also actively and positively offered many initiatives so as to promote the regional co-operation.

Secondly, Vietnam's integration into ASEAN in recent years has shown that in the present international situation, differences in political systems and ideology, if appropriately dealt with, are not unsolvable obstacles in the process of regional integration. This is not just because ASEAN has a flexible structure of organization that could admit all of the Southeast Asian countries but more importantly, Vietnam and other ASEAN countries have many mutual benefits in a peaceful, stable, and developing Southeast

Asia. All of the Southeast Asian countries are interested in an environment which is favourable for the assurance of their national independence, territorial integrity, economic development, and life improvement according to the orientation raised by "Vision 2020". All of the Southeast Asian countries have common problems that they all have to solve: erasing hunger and reducing poverty, preventing smuggling, piracy, forest fire, drugs, diseases, and social evils. The Southeast Asian countries must be watchful for the danger of insecurity due to the internal and external destructive activities which cause ethnic and religion conflicts, kidnapping, and terrorism. Each country's effort can only be multiplied if it is part of the mutual effort of the whole association, so the connection among the member countries is an objective demand which brings about benefits for them all.

Thirdly, Vietnam's joining into ASEAN and the increase of ASEAN members up to ten have increased the collective strength of ASEAN and the importance of its voice in the international politics. Thanks to its agreement, ASEAN has increased its partners' trust. As a result, ASEAN has successfully held the meetings of ARF and ASEM, positively contributed to APEC, and offered many initiatives to ensure peace and security in the region as well as in the world. At the same time, many ASEAN countries have received assistance and investment from big countries and international organizations. ASEAN's position in the world's relations has remarkably increased.

With its effort and contribution to the common success of ASEAN, Vietnam has raised its own position in the eyes of international organizations and of other countries. After joining ASEAN, Vietnam has actively taken part in the external activities of the association. It has also had its position in the activities of ARF and ASEM and it joined APEC. Vietnam has political, economic, and cultural relations with the regional organizations and with most countries, especially the big ones. The heads-of-state of the superpowers in the world have visited Vietnam, expressing friendship and goodwill in cooperation. The Vietnam-China relation and Vietnam-Russia relation have been reinforced and enlarged and the Vietnam-America Bilateral Trade Agreement was signed, which is the remarkable manifestation of the achievement of Vietnam's external activities. The preparation for Vietnam to join WTO is on a promising progress. These achievements help Vietnam enter a new century with more confident and steady steps.

Fourth, each step of development, however, creates new problems and new challenges. On the one hand, these problems have historically derived from the consequences of the long-lasting war-time, which can't be overcome overnight. On the other hand, they have recently come from the unbalance of the development level and business experience. Exploiting the internal force and the strong will to develop strongly and taking advantage of external aids will make our development steady and effective. To

do this, it is necessary to consolidate the agreement within ASEAN, to increase peace-keeping, political security and stability in Southeast Asia to strengthen regional economic integration, and to enlarge international relations.

### 3. Conclusion: some proposals

a. There must be a scientific prediction of the future of ASEAN. ASEAN should be a mere organization connecting the countries in the region, in the sense of an *association*, with common goals. It should respect the benefits and traditions of each country. It should not be a *union* like EU. The relations with those partners who have strong economic potentials and political positions have brought about the challenge to ASEAN: it must keep its dignity using its real ability; it must not be dependent or dominated by powerful forces in the world's politics. This requires not only a great economic strength but also appropriate political strategies and flexible tactics. With its typical characteristics, Vietnam must plan long-term integration strategies and prepare appropriate measures for effective settlement when possible problems arise.

b. There must be appropriate policies for each ASEAN member, especially for Laos and Cambodia.

During the process of recovering the relationship with the 6 former ASEAN countries, Vietnam has produced many appropriate policies, promoting common beneficial similarities, reducing the negative

effects of the differences, and taking the opportunity to strengthen integration, especially economic integration.

As far as Laos and Cambodia are concerned, Vietnam, on the one hand, should intensify the traditional relation mainly for political security; on the other hand, Vietnam should help them with as much investment and aid as possible so as to occupy a certain position in their development. In comparison with many countries investing in Laos and Cambodia, Vietnam's economic ability is weak so profit should not be the only goal; when necessary, there should be flexible policies so as to maintain favourable relations for political security. The relations with Laos and to Cambodia should be different. The stability in these two countries has a direct effect on Vietnam's stability.

c. Firmly keep the principle of agreement and non-interference; firmly keep the balance in external relations.

It should be emphasized that the real leading goal of ASEAN since its birth has been political in nature though the Bangkok Declaration in 1967 said that its goal was to promote the socio-economic development. The ZOPFAN Declaration in 1971, the Bali Treaty in 1976, and ASEAN's activities in the 1970s and 1980s all tried to establish peace, security and stability in the region. After the end of the Cold War and the settlement of the Cambodian problem, ASEAN has paid more attention to economic development, which was shown through the decision to establish AFTA.

However, in reality, ASEAN's activities have followed the goal of peace and security, the evidence of which was ARF's activities and the appeal for Southeast Asia without nuclear weapons (SEANFWZ). After the monetary crisis in 1997, political problems arose in some countries with the tendency of secession, terrorism, religion and ethnic conflicts. A spark in an area or local can spread to large areas in a country or in the whole region. Southeast Asia is a big centre of Islam so many countries in the region have been precautious after the event in September, 11<sup>th</sup> 2001. However, the danger of a terrorism breakout as well as the spread of "the war against anti-terrorism" can occur in any place. As a result, peace-keeping, security, and stability in the region are the common benefit that connects the member countries. This great benefit encourages the countries in the association to reach a high consensus on the present problems.

The ASEAN countries have tried to maintain peace, which has been done through the writing of the Set of Behaving Rules in the East Sea and through the offering of opening to their partners.

However, the regional changes which may cause armed conflicts are still potential. Vietnam, situated in Southeast Asia and in the West belt of the Pacific Ocean, has vital interests in all aspects and has relations with all the countries in the region and with big countries. To maintain peace and stability, it is necessary to carry out equal policies among different countries, especially among the big

countries whose interests are related to the region.

Nowadays, when there exist heating problems in many regions and the intentions of the big countries have been clearer and clearer, firmly pursuing the line of peace and the external policies which are both vigilant and balanced among the international forces is the least dangerous way to protect domestic and regional security, and stability.

d. Promote the active economic integration into the region.

Economic integration, at any level, includes both cooperation and competition. ASEAN countries have decided to establish AFTA/CEPT because each country has its own benefits in the common benefits brought about by AFTA. The private benefits depend on the competitive strength of each economy and the common benefits depend on the solidarity, the maintenance of peace and stability, and the agreed commitments. The more the dependence among the countries and economic systems increases, the higher the demand to protect the national interest and competition is.

Vietnam's biggest difficulty is how to actively and positively join the current of the regional economic integration and, at the same time, protect and develop all the national interests, the typical identity as well as the interests of the region. In the course of integration, Vietnam has had some favourable conditions such as natural resources, people, dynamism, and appropriate external policies. In order to integrate into ASEAN effectively and

go further when Vietnam has joined WTO, it is necessary for Vietnam to overcome present challenges and difficulties. Vietnam has to prepare appropriate and effective measures and policies to increase the competitive strength of the economy and to turn challenges into opportunities for development. It is necessary to thoroughly grasp and observe the Political Department's Resolution to actively integrate into the international economy. The Resolution contains the goals, the guiding opinions, and particular duties. In the meantime, economists and business people have to have a comprehensive understanding of the rules and laws of ASEAN in general and of each partner in particular. The question *What do you know about the ASEAN customers?* has not been fluently answered by business people. The ignorance of the regional and international markets will pay a price. The saying "Knowing about the rival and knowing about oneself will help one win all the battles" is still helpful in today's external economy.

e. Increase educational and cultural exchange:

Education and culture are two broad fields. Here we just mention some points:

- Language: Due to many objective conditions, teaching and learning foreign languages in Vietnam, from secondary schools to universities (except those specializing in foreign languages), are still very weak. A social survey could prove that most university graduates, even university lecturers (except those who major in foreign languages) could not use a foreign language proficiently in their

profession. How one could receive the world's research achievements and use them in his/her lectures and research projects so as to modernize training if s/he does not use foreign languages?

We have attached importance to exporting labour but what we have not succeeded in is that we have sent abroad people who can't speak a foreign language to know what to do and how to do it. We are proud that Vietnamese workers are hard-working, skilful and quickly adaptable to technology. However, how can workers develop these strengths when they work abroad with a very poor competence in using foreign languages? Then, at high schools, vocational schools, and universities, teaching foreign languages must be incorporated in an overall strategy, with different levels appropriate for different learners. This is an effective long-term investment for integration as well as for labour export.

- Cultural exchanges among ASEAN countries are very important. Through cultural exchanges, Vietnam must better understand its friends and try to be better understood by them. Specially, it is necessary to write materials introducing ASEAN and its members in such a way that they are easy to read, to remember, and to popularize.

- Not only do we pay attention to teaching and learning languages, we must also attach importance to popularizing the Vietnamese language and culture abroad. Popularizing the Vietnamese language and culture has not been

properly paid attention to and put at a strategic range. The image of Vietnam has been considerably bent, creating improper obstacles to the exchange with, integration into and connection with the region.

In such a situation, it is necessary to write materials about Vietnam in foreign languages in order to make Vietnam known to ASEAN countries and to the whole world. However, only a few materials of such kinds have been written. Using foreign languages to introduce the research results of Vietnamese scientists will also increase the exchange of culture and science in the region. Up to now, some scientific journals in Vietnam have published annual issues written in foreign languages, which has a very practical meaning.

We have a very favourable opportunity for cultural exchanges organizing SEAGAMES 22 in Vietnam in 2003. Preparation has been

carried out in training, practising, and building the infrastructure. One equally important preparation that must be done is to help Vietnamese people know about their guests (who have many differences in religion and tradition) and behave in a civilized and polite manner. This is necessary for Vietnamese sport persons because they often interact with foreigners so they have many opportunities to introduce Vietnam and its people to foreigners. Sometimes foreigners may have an improper understanding about Vietnam just because of a player's improper behaviour. Sometimes the image of Vietnam is distorted in the eye of foreigners just because of an improper competition or behaviour lacking calm. This is part of the content of the people's external activities, a field which the party and government always attach importance to.

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