



Viet Nam and ASEAN



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Viet Nam acceded to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 1995. However, it does not mean that the bond between Viet Nam and the ASEAN founding members is merely 22 years old. As nations living together in the Southeast Asian region, Viet Nam and other members of the Association have a lot in common in their cultural identity and historical destiny – the foundations for cooperation and integration.

President Ho Chi Minh, the founder of the independent Viet Nam in 1945, identified friendship, cooperation, and mutual support with other countries in Asia and Southeast Asia as the top priorities of foreign policy. In line with the tradition of Vietnamese culture that ‘a close neighbour is better than a distant relative’, he defined a succinct policy statement ‘... the attitude towards Asian countries is brotherhood’.

After gaining independence amid total isolation and a fierce war against foreign aggression, Viet Nam had sought to establish relations with Burma (now Myanmar), Cambodia, Indonesia, the Lao People's Democratic Republic, the Philippines, and Thailand. The first Vietnamese representative missions were opened in Bangkok and Rangoon.

Unfortunately, the Cold War and the confrontation and détente conjuncture between and among major powers divided countries in this region, and even brought the latter to confrontation. It is understandable then that the birth of ASEAN could not allay suspicions of the non-members, including Viet Nam, about the Association.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the bipolar world came to an end. After decades of war and confrontation in Southeast Asia, peoples in the region all had a desire for peace, stability, and cooperation for development. Globalisation and regionalisation had driven efforts to mend fences existing between Southeast Asian nations, enlarge ASEAN to embrace the entire region, diversify and strengthen intra-bloc cooperation, and enhance the Association's position in the international arena.

At the same time, Viet Nam launched the reform policy (*Doi Moi*) on both domestic and foreign fronts to meet the ultimate interest of safeguarding peace for development. To that end, the top priority of foreign policy was to restore and strengthen the cooperative relations with its neighbouring nations at all three levels, namely border-sharing, Southeast Asian and Asia-Pacific countries.

As a result, the six ASEAN founding members and Viet Nam came together sharing the same wish. Viet Nam became an observer in 1992 and a full member of the Association in 1995.

Viet Nam, though a newcomer, has actively participated in the work of the Association and played a dynamic role in promoting intra-bloc cooperation as well as ASEAN's cooperation with other partners. It could be said that ASEAN flourished in all aspects in the late 1990s and the early 2000s. Regarding its membership, ASEAN-6 became ASEAN-10. In economic terms, the ASEAN Free Trade Area was established. In security, the ASEAN Regional Forum was founded and the Southeast Asian Nuclear-Weapon-Free-Zone Treaty was signed, followed by the 1992 ASEAN Declaration on the South China Sea and the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea 10 years later.

In international relations, ASEAN played a leading role in a number of institutions including, inter alia, the Asia-Europe Meeting and the East Asia Forum. Viet Nam can be proud of its direct contribution to major initiatives of the Association.

Those spectacular developments have created necessary premises for ASEAN to rise to a higher level with the ASEAN Community building on the political-security, economic, and socio-cultural pillars as well as the adoption of the ASEAN Charter. ASEAN's prestige and role in the world, especially in the eyes of major countries, have been elevated more than ever before.

As one of the Vietnamese officials directly involved in ASEAN's activities since the early 1990s, I have a few of my own reflections as follows:

First, from an objective view, the Southeast Asian peoples have a shared interest to maintain peace and stability for cooperation and development as long as they are not influenced by the external factors due to their own calculations.

Second, the stability and prosperity of each country as well as the intra-bloc solidarity and cooperation are closely intertwined.

Third, the role and prestige of the Association as a whole and each member in the international arena can only be sustained and enhanced if both factors are upheld.

Reality has shown that, at times, 'unity' and 'diversity', 'nation-state interest' and 'the interest of the Association', and 'centripetalism' and 'centrifugalism' are conflicting each other. Without a satisfactory solution, this will create difficulties for the Association and each member country.

ASEAN's 50th anniversary is marked by major opportunities intertwined with no small challenges and difficulties. There are signs that the world economy is seemingly moving into a new period qualitatively different as a result of the fourth industrial revolution. The advantages from cheap labour and natural resources have diminished. The fierce competition in growth has triggered many urgent social issues, creating a fertile breeding ground for populism, pragmatic nationalism, and protectionism to expand, thereby resulting in profound changes in the countries' political and social landscapes and international relations at large.

The accurate identification of and effective response to these new and profound changes are urgent demands for all countries, and ASEAN members are no exception. Given the shift in the global economic structure and signs of protectionism, ASEAN, without solutions to accelerate its economic restructure and rigorously promote intra-bloc cooperation, will face challenges. Given the new changes in international politics and relations as well as the regional and global security architecture, ASEAN will not have an easy road ahead if it does not tighten its ranks and make necessary adjustments.

In Vietnamese there is an old adage: ‘A single tree cannot make a forest’. In my humble opinion, should the 10 ASEAN Member States act together to make effective use of the lessons learned throughout its half-a-century history of development, a satisfactory solution to new challenges will certainly be found to lead the Community firmly into the future and maintain its status in the world.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

As one of the most respected Vietnamese diplomats, **Vu Khoan** served in the foreign service for over 50 years in different capacities – from Attaché to Deputy Prime Minister in charge of foreign affairs. Throughout his career, he has been part of various milestones in Viet Nam’s diplomacy. These include, among others, Viet Nam’s accession to ASEAN in 1995, the conclusion of the Viet Nam–United States Bilateral Trade Agreement in 2002, and Viet Nam’s accession to the World Trade Organization in 2007. With regard to ASEAN, he played a major role in coordinating Viet Nam’s preparations to join ASEAN in 1995 and after that served as Viet Nam’s first leader of the ASEAN Senior Officials Meeting. During his term as Minister of Commerce from 2000 to 2002, he chaired the ASEAN Economic Ministers Meeting and related meetings held in 2001 in Ha Noi. From 2002 to 2007, as Deputy Prime Minister in charge of foreign affairs, he continued to oversee Viet Nam’s participation in and contribution to ASEAN at a time when regional community building was gathering speed. For Vietnamese youth, not only those working in the foreign service, his experiences, thoughts, and writings as being shared in numerous occasions such as his interviews, lectures, speeches, and books are valuable guides and sources of inspiration.

Born in 1937, he is married with two children. He speaks Russian and English fluently.