

THE UNITED STATES AND VIETNAM TIES IN THE CONTEXT OF UNITED STATES – ASEAN RELATIONS

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Abstract

For Vietnam, the United States (U.S.) and ASEAN are the most important partners in foreign relations. Therefore, there have been many studies mentioned bilateral relations Vietnamese – U.S. or Vietnam - ASEAN. This article wants to put the U.S. - Vietnam in the context of the U.S - ASEAN relations to find the answers to the questions "Are there interactions between U.S - Vietnam and the U.S. - ASEAN or not?"; "How do the interactions express?"; "Does a triangle relations exist?" Based mainly on the political dynamics among them, these questions will be analyzed. The answers can be given suggestions for recognizing U.S. - ASEAN - Vietnam.

Keywords: ASEAN, relations, U.S.–ASEAN, Vietnam–ASEAN, U.S.-Vietnam.

The Vietnam - United States (U.S.) relationship dominated as it is by both historical factors and current issues, enjoys a special character. For Vietnamese, the 40th anniversary of the fall of Saigon on 30 April is considered a big event that marks a milestone in Vietnam's contemporary history; and 15 July 2015 is the 20th anniversary of the establishment of Vietnam – U.S. diplomatic relations, an event both countries consider to be positive. Rapprochement did not come easily. However, despite the twists and turn in the road, the two sides have traveled a long distance. Nowadays, as the strongest economy in the world, the United States is also the most important export market of Vietnam, accounting for one-fifth of Vietnam's annual export revenue. Since the commencement of the bilateral trade agreement in 2001, Vietnam – U.S. trade turnover has increased 12 times and reached USD 20 billion in 2011

(*Business Times*, 14 December 2011). The United States ranks seventh among the largest investors in Vietnam (General Statistics Office 2012: 163).

Vietnam joined the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in July 1995, at the same time as the United States and Vietnam achieved normalization. Distrust in the relationship between Vietnam – ASEAN has gradually turned into friendship and cooperation on many, it not all issues. While Vietnam does not see eye to eye with every member of ASEAN, Vietnam, day by day, has become an active participant in a key Asian regional organization. For ASEAN the organization, the United States is an important partner in multilateral relations. Close ties between the United States and many ASEAN countries also make U.S. - ASEAN relationship even more special.

For Vietnam, the United States and ASEAN are leading partners in terms of multilateral relations. There has been a variety of detailed studies on the many aspects of Vietnam - U.S. or Vietnam - ASEAN bilateral relations, but paper examines U.S - Vietnam ties primarily in the context of the US - ASEAN relationships. Other actors such as Russia, China, and Japan must, of course, be taken into account, but this paper does not concentrate on these players. The purposes here are to examine a new multilateral among three entities - the United States, ASEAN and Vietnam and how this engagement has developed in different contexts. The basis for examination will be the diplomatic and political activities among these three entities. The answers may help clarify the complex nature of what can be called U.S. - ASEAN – Vietnam triangle.

The contexts can be divided into three major periods: Cold War (1967-1991), Post- Cold War (1991 - 2008) and since 2008.

Cold War Era

After a series of failed efforts to establish a regional or quasi-regional organization such as the Colombo Plan in 1951, the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) in 1955, the Association of Southeast Asia in 1961, and the MAPHILINDO in 1963, ASEAN was established in 1967 with five members: Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Singapore and the Philippines. Brunei joined in 1983. ASEAN was considered the first success and the one genuinely South East Asian organization dedicated to reducing tensions among member states. Its unspoken purpose was to contest the expansion of communism and to minimise direct participation in the Vietnam War. Though the 1967 Bangkok Declaration declared that ASEAN was “open for participation to all states in the Southeast Asian Region” (ASEAN Document

Series 19 88: 27-8), the door was barred to the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) during that period. Inevitably, the ASEAN - Vietnam relationship was strongly affected by the Cold War, particularly the presence of the U.S. in the region. Washington “welcomed” ASEAN as integral to its revamped containment strategy as outlined in the 1969 Nixon Doctrine (Hari Singh 1997: 217). The Soviet Union’s support for Vietnam troubled the ASEAN countries get together and tended to foster reliance on the U.S. The close relationship between the U.S. and various ASEAN members such as Thailand, Philippines made Vietnam believe that ASEAN was in effect a U.S.’s “tool” organisation.

The opinions of the individual ASEAN countries regarding the DRV, however, were not strictly the same, and it was not possible to consider ASEAN as a regional organisation that went “against Vietnam.” For example, Indonesia which had experienced its revolution had viewpoints similar to that of Vietnam, for example when it also joined the Non-Aligned Movement. In other respects, the strong military presence of the U.S. in the region and its alliance with Thailand and the Philippines indicated to some in the DRV that turned ASEAN was an “aggressive anti-Vietnamese communism” organization. As U.S policy changed after 1968, and particularly in 1972 as the American withdrawal neared, the barriers of the ASEAN – Vietnam relationship began to fall. This could be noted more clearly when the “Spring Offensive of 1972” and the 1973 Paris Peace Agreement strongly affected the U.S.’ support to the Saigon regime. This was one of the reasons resulting in the decisions of Singapore and Kuala Lumpur to normalise their relations with Hanoi in 1973.

With Vietnam’s reunification in 1975 and the defeat of the U.S. in Indochina, American influence in Southeast Asia reached a low point. U.S. – ASEAN relations stagnated, and ASEAN moved to Vietnam. Thailand and the Philippines normalised their relations with Vietnam, and ASEAN also committed to assisting the Indochina countries to rebuild their countries after the war. During 1976, ASEAN issued the Bali declaration on “zone of peace, freedom, and neutrality” (ZOPFAN) and received strong support from Vietnam.

In 1977-1978, regional evolution led to the first chance to normalize relation between Vietnam and the United States but failed in October 1978 (Frederick Z. Brown 2010: 162-169); Vietnam sent its military forces into Cambodia in December 1978, and the United States and ASEAN joined in isolation Vietnam. They were joined by Japan and the European Community. Although during the late 1970s and early 1980s, the presence and impact of the United States on ASEAN were not as strong as before, the United States’ close

bilateral relationships with various ASEAN members created favorable conditions for the United States and ASEAN cooperation.

In order to resist the Vietnamese military occupation of Cambodia, an informal U.S – China - ASEAN alliance was formed (Hari Singh 1997: 215-299), in which the U.S. played an important part by supporting ASEAN's strategy in dealing with the Cambodia issue. The U.S.'s policy removed the heavy pressure in the ASEAN – Vietnam relationship. ASEAN's "isolate Vietnam" policy was broken when Jakarta decided to normalise its relations with Hanoi in November 1990.

In sum, it can be seen that since the establishment of ASEAN in 1967, during the whole Cold War era, the U.S. - ASEAN - Vietnam relationship by no means "triangular" yet still had reciprocal impacts in which the U.S. and ASEAN were at one end of the bridge while at the other end was Vietnam.

Post- Cold War

With the end of the Cold War, the United States became the unchallenged single superpower country. In the region Vietnamese troops withdrew from Cambodia in August 1989; the United Nations was given the mandate to enforce a ceasefire and deal with refugees and disarmament known as United Nations Transitional Authority (UNTAC) in Cambodia; in 1993, after the national election, Norodom Sihanouk was restored as King of Cambodia. All this placed the U.S. - ASEAN - Vietnam relationship in a new context.

All three actors made adjustments to their foreign policies, resulting in significant changes in the nature of the relationships. ASEAN wanted to show its independence and self-control and to maintain its balanced position vis-a-vis the United States - China-Japan in the region. This policy altered United States' position in the region. During the first decade after the Cold War, no multilateral military arrangement was sought by the United States and ASEAN. In some political issues, the United States and ASEAN were not in agreement. Several ASEAN members repeatedly objected to the fact that the United States associated the human right issue with trade policy and went against the United States' protest to admit Myanmar into ASEAN in 1997. On the U.S. side, though its presence in the region was reduced, it developed other approaches in the relationship with ASEAN, for example, the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). Increasingly, the U.S - ASEAN relationship began to turn into a partnership.

Vietnam declared an open foreign affair policy in 1986 and made great efforts in *doi moi* (renovation). With the Agreement on a Comprehensive

Political Settlement of the Cambodian Conflict in October 1991, a significant obstacle to Vietnam's foreign relations was removed and the Vietnam - ASEAN, and Vietnam - U.S relationships were improved. In April 1991, U.S. presented Vietnam with a road map for quid-pro-quo normalisation. In February 1994, President Bill Clinton lifted the trade embargo on Vietnam. In 1995, U.S and Vietnam signed agreements on property claims and established liaison offices in Hanoi and Washington. On July 11, normalisation of relations was announced and the embassies opened in capitals soon thereafter. On 28 July 28, 1995, Vietnam joined ASEAN.

It is obvious that the normalization of the U.S. and Vietnam relationship had opened the door for Vietnam to become an official member of this increasingly influential regional association. However, without Vietnam and ASEAN relationship's foundation which had been built for a long time, this process might have taken longer. Thus, it is fair to say that since Vietnam became an ASEAN member, the U.S. - ASEAN - Vietnam relationship has become in effect a triangle. With the entry of Laos, Myanmar, and Cambodia in 1997 and 1999, ASEAN becomes a complete regional organization.

The U.S. had to focus sharply on the fight against international terrorism after 11 September 2001. Washington sought alliances and special arrangements in order to combat the expansion of terrorism activities. One result was in the strengthening of the U.S. relationship and cooperation with ASEAN during the first decade of the 21st century such as U.S. - ASEAN Joint Declaration on Cooperation to Combat International Terrorism on 1 August 2002, and by appointing an ambassador to the ASEAN Secretariat. However, it seemed that during the administration of President George W. Bush's administration, the U.S. - ASEAN relationship did not make significant progress. In particular, the postponement of President Bush's plan visit to Singapore for the first ever U.S. - ASEAN Summit in September 2007, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's decision not to attend for the second time in three years the ASEAN Post-Ministerial Conference and the ARF in Manila in August 2007, and Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia and the Pacific Christopher Hill's no-show at the U.S. - ASEAN dialogue meeting held in summer 2007 in Washington disappointed many people (Limaye, S.P 2007: 447-64).

Meanwhile, the U.S. - Vietnam relationship prospered. One notable sign was the first official visit since 1975 of a Vietnamese head of state, President Nguyen Minh Triet in June 2007; Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung in June 2008 to the United States; and many other cabinet-level visits both ways. Seen from another perspective, the fact that the United States strengthened its relationship with Vietnam during this period as a new and active member of

ASEAN can also be viewed as “a more balanced approach to ASEAN as a whole” (Limaye, S.P 2007: 456).

In the New Context

After the Cold War, ASEAN has continuously made efforts to affirm its position in the region. ASEAN has emphasised its policy of maintaining a balanced position between China and the United States, at the same time positioning itself at the centre in expanding relations with and creating attraction to other partners such as ASEAN plus Japan, Korea and China (ASEAN + 3), Asia – European Meeting (ASEM), ASEAN - Russia Summit, ASEAN Defense Ministries Meeting (ADMM). It also completed its image by issuing ASEAN Charter, declaring the building of political, economic and cultural communities, etc.

When he took office in 2009, President Obama began to promote a closer relationship with ASEAN. Hillary Clinton was the first U.S. Secretary of State to visit the ASEAN Secretariat in Jakarta in February 2009. In July of the same year, the Secretary Clinton made her second visit to Southeast Asia to participate in the ARF and signed the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC), after more than ten years of ASEAN's repeated urging. It was in the same year that the first ASEAN - U.S Leaders' Meeting was held in Singapore. This was considered an important milestone in the U.S. - ASEAN relations. Later, the second ASEAN - U.S. Leaders' Meeting was held on 24 September 2010 in New York, and the parties entered into some important documents such as the ASEAN - U.S. Joint Statement and the Terms of Reference of the ASEAN - U.S Eminent Persons Group (EPG). The fourth Meeting was held in Phnom Penh, Cambodia in November 2012. Also in 2010, the fifth East Asia Summit (EAS) in Hanoi, Vietnam, decided to include two more members, the United States and Russia.

In the context of this positive evolution of the U.S. - ASEAN relationship, the bilateral U.S. - Vietnam ties have been maintained and steadily developed. It can be said that 2010 was the year that the triangular relationship among US - ASEAN - Vietnam began to emerge clearly. It was also the year that Vietnam officially assumed the role of Chair of ASEAN. Secretary Clinton visited Vietnam twice to participate in the ARF in Hanoi in July and the ASEAN Foreign Ministers Meeting in October 2010. She also made another official visit to Vietnam in July 2012.

It is obvious that South East Asia is an integral part of the U.S.'s Asia – Pacific strategy, while the Asia – Pacific strategy is the “pivot” is a key factor in

the U.S.'s global strategy. ASEAN will continue to have an important role. ASEAN has become the most successful organisation of the third world countries, which includes a country (Indonesia) with the world's largest Muslim population. Maintaining solid regional cooperation is one way to promote the concept of democracy and freedom and for the United States to improve relations generally with the Muslim world. Vietnam offers many significant advantages to ASEAN stability. Moreover, the relations between Vietnam and others player such as China, Russia, European Union are prime issues in the U.S.'s strategy of rebalancing in Asia.

To return to the original question, a triangularity of interests and policies does indeed exist between the United States, ASEAN, and Vietnam. It is an *informal triangular relationship* because ASEAN is a loose, regional organisation, and all decisions are based on consensus. Therefore, the multilateral relations between the United States and ASEAN were simultaneously based on workable bilateral relations. When ASEAN becomes stronger and more action – oriented, the triangular relationship may become more obvious. All three actors are willing to maintain this informal relationship because the United States wishes to use ASEAN as a mean to strengthen its bilateral relations with member countries. Vietnam wishes to rely on ASEAN to consolidate and balance its relations with large countries such as the United States and China. ASEAN also wishes to become the region's central forum to develop relations with "big countries" to benefit its member.

The informal status quo can be upheld because ASEAN and also Vietnam are only a part of the United States' policy towards Asia. It would not be expected that more diplomatic actions from the United States towards the region and Vietnam because the Obama administration still has to face with various pressing issues than the South East Asia region which has been quite stable and did not affect the United States very much.

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