



# Vietnam and the search for security leadership in ASEAN

Ralf Emmers and Huong Le Thu

## ABSTRACT

Indonesia has traditionally been viewed as a *de facto* leader of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the regional body remains the cornerstone of Indonesian foreign policy. The paper addresses the question of whether other member states have become influential actors or even sectoral leaders in their own right by playing a direct role in a particular aspect of ASEAN affairs. This question is addressed by examining the regional policies of Vietnam, a country that has been mostly neglected in the existing ASEAN literature despite its strategic weight. The paper focuses on the evolving role of Vietnam in ASEAN and highlights its diplomatic initiatives, as well as various conditions to evaluate its potential to take up a leading security role in the regional body in the years to come.

## Introduction

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is an inter-governmental organization that has worked on the principles of national sovereignty and noninterference in the affairs of other states and a refusal to recognize a particular member as its formal leader. Yet Indonesia has traditionally been viewed as a *de facto* leader due to the sheer size of its territory and population. While often limited in actual content and impact, this informal type of leadership has generally been accepted both in policy circles as well as in the academic literature dedicated to regionalism in Southeast Asia.<sup>1</sup> This raises the question of whether other member states have been influential members or even sectoral leaders in their own right by playing a direct role in a particular aspect of ASEAN affairs.

This paper addresses this question by examining the regional policies of Vietnam, a country that has too often been neglected in the large body of literature on ASEAN. Vietnam is increasingly referred to as a rising middle power in Southeast Asia.<sup>3</sup> Comparatively speaking, Vietnam's stake in the security and international politics of the region is higher than many other ASEAN member states when it comes to traditional security considerations, especially in light of its territorial claims in the South China Sea. At the outset of important geopolitical changes, and Vietnam's growing competency in ASEAN, the paper focuses on the evolving role of Vietnam and explores conditions that may have enabled it to become an active and increasingly influential member of the regional body since it first joined in 1995. That said, the assumption that Vietnam could become the broad leader of ASEAN in the near to medium term should be rejected. It is clear for the informed observer of the Association that Vietnam is not equipped to or interested to replace Indonesia and become ASEAN's new leader due to a series of material factors and regional considerations. Indonesia itself continues to regard ASEAN as the cornerstone of its foreign policy and to play its self-styled role as the *de facto* leader of the organization despite growing frustration in Jakarta that fellow ASEAN members have repeatedly watered down most of its proposals for progressive reforms.<sup>4</sup>

A research question that is more puzzling to address is to evaluate conditions that may lead Vietnam to become a sectoral leader of ASEAN in the area of international security. The paper claims that such conditions are partly to be found in a changing Vietnamese perception of ASEAN. It argues that the perceived utility of ASEAN to Vietnam has remained solid throughout the last

25 years, and that despite the adoption by Hanoi of more realistic expectations of what the regional body can actually achieve, especially in the context of the South China Sea dispute. Other important conditions are said to be whether Vietnam has the economic means to play such a role and whether other members are comfortable with Vietnam doing so and finally whether Vietnam can exercise influence in ASEAN amid rising great power competition.

The paper examines Vietnam's diplomatic efforts aimed at preserving unity in the area of international security and upholding the relevance of ASEAN as a regional security actor. It considers Vietnam's evolving interests in and expectations of ASEAN and examines the benefits it has drawn from its membership. The paper asserts that such benefits have influenced Hanoi's willingness to play a more direct role in ASEAN especially since its successful chairmanship in 2010. This is likely to be further demonstrated in its ongoing chairmanship of the regional body in 2020. The paper argues that Vietnam's rising influence in ASEAN is based on its continued commitment to the regional body that has led to new initiatives aimed at strengthening regional security cooperation and countering divisive tendencies that have undermined ASEAN's ability to operate as a security grouping.

The paper consists of four sections. The first briefly discusses the concept of leadership before introducing the notion of sectoral leadership within a Realist tradition. The second examines how Vietnam's original aspirations have changed since it first joined ASEAN in 1995. The third section of the paper looks for signs of sectoral leadership by Vietnam in the area of international security, especially in the context of the South China Sea dispute and the ASEAN engagement with Cambodia and Laos in response to Chinese rising influence in continental Southeast Asia. The final section reviews a combination of material and normative conditions to better evaluate Vietnam's potential to take up a leading security role in ASEAN in the coming years.

## Sectoral Leadership

The concept of "leadership" has been widely discussed in the academic literature and numerous aspects of the phenomenon have been examined both conceptually and empirically over the years. Leadership is associated with legitimacy, persuasion, accommodation and responsibility. The exercise of leadership is perceived by others as benign and nonthreatening to their survival. A leader can therefore be contrasted to a hegemon, which is expected to directly and sometimes aggressively dominate weaker states. A hegemon prevails over others due to its predominant power and capability to use force against other states with weaker military capabilities.<sup>5</sup> On the contrary, exercising leadership involves the ability to provide solutions to foreign policy problems by engaging other governments. Rather than imposing its solutions and actions, a leader is expected to factor in the perspectives and priorities of others by forging inclusive coalitions. Leadership can involve the provision of public goods such as a peaceful strategic environment and sustainable economic development as well as the resolution of collective action problems and the promotion of institution building.<sup>6</sup> In this sense, the exercise of leadership depends on possessing the necessary material capabilities to implement effective policies and also on normative attributes, such as ideational legitimacy and reputation, so that the form of leadership can be accepted by others.

Research on leadership has often assumed that its primary aspects are embodied by a single actor. In contrast, and with immediate relevance to this paper, Friedrich et al argue that this is rarely the case, explaining that multiple actors within a team may serve as leaders in both formal and informal capacities. In other words, leadership is made up of behavioral roles that often fall under the umbrella of several actors.<sup>7</sup> A distinction should therefore be made between broad and sectoral leadership. Broad leadership involves a leader influencing a group of states over a wide range of issues. In contrast, sectoral leadership involves particular members within an organization that seek to influence other members on specific issue areas.<sup>8</sup> Sectoral leadership is provided informally by various members in contrast to broad leadership that is mostly associated to a single and formally appointed leader.<sup>9</sup> Exercising sectoral leadership is also dependent on the perceived strategic utility

of a particular issue. Finally, sectoral leadership is relational as it involves mutual influence between team members as they work toward organizational objectives. Therefore, as observed by Carson et al., this form of leadership is reciprocal with the reaching of consensus between member states viewed as a necessary condition.<sup>10</sup>

In addition to broad forms of leadership, Henrikson posits that global and regional organizations such as the United Nations (UN) and the European Union (EU) are conducive platforms for developing leadership in niche sectors.<sup>11</sup> In other words, a form of sectoral leadership is likely to be found in international governmental organizations. On that basis, this paper argues that there is room for multiple sources of leadership in particular niche areas within ASEAN. Singapore has for instance been recognized as a leading member in the economic sphere. Sectoral leadership – as the sections below demonstrate – requires commitment and investment. Whether Vietnam, Singapore or any other members are willing to lead ASEAN in a particular sector of its activities depends on their individual perceptions of how much utility they see in the organization. The second condition to exercise sectoral leadership is some form of recognition from the rest; even if informal, it needs to be accepted by others. Beyond its own internal considerations, this raises the question of whether other members are comfortable with Vietnam taking up a sectoral leadership role in international security.

In addition to its focus on sectoral rather than broad leadership, the leadership theme adopted in this paper has affinities to the theoretical positions of Realism. From this viewpoint, two factors traditionally determine whether a state endorses a leadership role; mainly, its immediate security interests and its ultimate survival in the anarchic international system. The areas of interest addressed in this paper are international security and changing geopolitical circumstances in Southeast Asia. The paper claims that the primary aim of Vietnam for exercising leadership in ASEAN is to establish and preserve a stable security environment in line with its own national security interests. Hence, the paper's theme and argumentative thrust on Vietnam's evolving role in ASEAN is in the tradition of a realist interpretation of regional multilateralism and its focus on power politics. Realists who have studied Southeast Asian affairs regard the role of ASEAN as a reflection of its members' calculations of their respective security interests.<sup>12</sup>

## **Vietnam's Evolving Role in ASEAN**

### ***Original Aspirations***

Vietnam played an important role in ASEAN's development even before it formally joined the Association. To some extent, it was the Vietnam War that prompted the six original ASEAN members to establish a collective body despite existing mutual animosities. The threat of the spread of communism, popularized by the American domino theory, deepened the suspicions of other Southeast Asian states toward Vietnam. Seen as a reformulation of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) created in 1955, ASEAN was initially considered by Hanoi as part of an American policy of containment and it refused to join the regional body when it was established in August 1967.

The distrust did not end with the unification of Vietnam in April 1975 that followed the American withdrawal in 1973 and the abandonment of the US strategy to stop the spread of communism in Indochina. After its reunification, The Socialist Republic of Vietnam refused the invitation to attend ASEAN gatherings as an observer. It also criticized the Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality (ZOPFAN), a declaration adopted in 1971 that registered a call for regional autonomy, and demanded instead in 1975 for the promotion of "independence, peace and genuine neutrality in Southeast Asia".<sup>13</sup> Despite its hostility, the ASEAN countries still invited Vietnam to adhere to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) signed at the first ASEAN Summit held in Bali in 1976. The then Vietnamese refusal to adhere to the TAC thwarted ASEAN's attempt to establish a new regional order in the region. Vietnam's intervention in Cambodia in 1978 further

deteriorated ASEAN-Vietnamese relations. It terminated ASEAN's hopes of establishing stable relations with Hanoi and violated ASEAN's core principles; namely, respect for national sovereignty and noninterference in the affairs of other states. The Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia further strengthened the need for a collective response and a shared view of regional security. To date, ASEAN's diplomatic response to Vietnam's occupation of Cambodia remains the organization's strongest collective stand in its institutional history.

The turnaround of Vietnam toward ASEAN derived from domestic economic considerations and the resolution of the Cambodian conflict. The Sixth National Party Congress in Vietnam announced in 1986 the policy of *Doi Moi* (Renovation reforms). The objective was to end the decline of the Vietnamese economy by transitioning from central planning to a market-orientated economy. The core directives for the remaking of Vietnam's foreign policy during the *Doi Moi* reforms era were: 1) to break out from economic embargo and diplomatic isolation; 2) to boost the national economy, including through attracting foreign direct investment, official development assistance and trade; 3) to integrate Vietnam into regional and international organizations.<sup>14</sup> Joining ASEAN was identified as instrumental to achieve all of these goals.

The membership in ASEAN was an economic necessity for Vietnam but it also had a diplomatic and symbolic meaning as it committed Hanoi to peacefully manage disputes with its neighbors and follow the norms and principles reflected in ASEAN's structures. Vietnam's membership "marked the end of its isolation in international politics and laid to rest its image as an intruder in regional politics".<sup>15</sup> ASEAN gave Hanoi an opportunity to integrate into mainstream international affairs and to diversify its external relations, especially with regional states. Vietnam's increased international recognition and regional integration helped Hanoi in re-orientating its foreign policy "from its intense preoccupation with big powers, particularly China, to a more balanced position in which regional cooperation with other Southeast Asian states plays a significant role".<sup>16</sup> In Vietnam's own assessment, its accession transformed Southeast Asia's image from being the so-called "Balkans of Asia" to becoming a regional "zone of peace". Its Ministry of Foreign Affairs later stated: "In view of its geo-political position and its evolution, Vietnam is a factor bringing groups in ASEAN closer together, and ending division in Southeast Asia (...) Vietnam's accession into ASEAN have created cohesion in the region."<sup>17</sup> The change in Vietnam's foreign policy that started in the 1990s has since transformed the country's image into a benevolent, active and peaceful actor and asserted its diplomatic position within Southeast Asia and the broader Indo-Pacific.

Vietnam's entry into ASEAN in 1995 also marked a milestone for the collective identity of the organization. The Vietnamese membership symbolized the institutionalization of a process of diplomatic reconciliation between Hanoi and the original member states (Malaysia, Indonesia, Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand). Not only did it transform Hanoi from an enemy into a member state, Vietnam was also the first communist country to join the Association, transforming the organization's political inclination from an anti-communist bulwark into a regional entity that accommodates all political systems in Southeast Asia.<sup>18</sup> It also indicated Vietnam's willingness to endorse ASEAN's principles of respect for national sovereignty, noninterference in the affairs of other states, and the nonuse of force.

### **ASEAN's Rising Utility for Vietnam**

ASEAN has provided Vietnam with a platform to exercise its diplomacy, socialize into the international community and break-out from its diplomatic isolation following the Indochinese wars.<sup>19</sup> It has facilitated Vietnam's transformation from a socialist warrior, regional intruder and rouge regime, into a responsible member of the international community, a supporter of multilateralism and a cooperative neighbor. Its successful chairmanship in 2010 was an important moment in Vietnam's integration into ASEAN and it served as a measure of its socialization into its structures.<sup>20</sup> The chairmanship was challenging both in terms of achieving certain goals in ASEAN community building as well as responding to external conditions, such as the Global

Financial Crisis and Chinese rising assertiveness in the South China Sea dispute. 2010 also marked an expansion of ASEAN partnerships, including the United States and Russia joining the East Asia Summit (EAS), Canada and Turkey signing the TAC and the foreign trade agreement between ASEAN and Australia and New Zealand coming into force. It was also the year when the US State Secretary, Hillary Clinton, attended the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in Hanoi and stated: “The United States has a national interest in freedom of navigation, open access to Asia’s maritime commons and respect for international law in the South China Sea.”<sup>21</sup> Vietnam welcomed the American support and saw its expression at a multilateral meeting held in Hanoi as highly symbolic.

The ASEAN membership has advanced Vietnam’s economic development goals. Since 1995, Vietnam has played a benevolent role and worked toward a deeper economic integration of the continental Southeast Asian states into the regional body.<sup>22</sup> Hanoi has championed a number of initiatives within the organization to reduce the development gap between the new and original member states as illustrated by the Hanoi Declaration on Narrowing Development Gap for Closer ASEAN Integration in 2001.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) remains one of the pillars for Vietnam to align its economic policies with the rest of the Southeast Asian region. 22 years after Vietnam became a member of ASEAN, its total export turnover with the region increased seven-fold, from 5.8 USD billion in 1996 to 41.49 USD billion in 2016, accounting for 11.8 percent of the total import and export turnover of the country.<sup>24</sup>

For Vietnam – a socialist country moving toward a market-led economy – cooperation in the context of the AEC has been also a valuable learning experience. Trading with the Southeast Asian markets is essential for Vietnam to gain broader market access to major extra-regional partners, such as the United States, the EU, China, Japan and India. In the official assessment of the Vietnamese Communist Party, ASEAN and its various economic initiatives has helped Vietnam prepare for deeper integration into the world’s economy and its participation in the Trans-Pacific Strategic Economic Partnership (TPP) and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), among other trade agreements.<sup>25</sup>

Beyond its economic interests, various ASEAN platforms that cover security matters constitute a multilateral base for Vietnam to engage key partners like the United States, China, Japan, Australia and others. The ASEAN Plus mechanisms include the ARF and the ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting Plus (ADMM+), which Vietnam takes credit for initiating. The inclusion of eight strategic partners (Australia, China, India, Japan, New Zealand, The Republic of Korea, the Russian Federation and the United States) into the ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting (ADMM) led to the creation of the ADMM+ that first convened in Hanoi in October 2010.<sup>26</sup> The Vietnamese 2009 Defense White Paper states that “Vietnam highly values and actively participates in multilateral cooperation on security issues through international and regional organizations such as the UN, ASEAN, ARF and APEC.”<sup>27</sup> Not only have such platforms advanced Vietnam’s strategic diplomacy, they have contributed to a significant transformation. Vietnam is now pursuing security within ASEAN in Southeast Asia and along with its members in the wider Indo-Pacific rather than against them, as was the case during the Cold War era,<sup>28</sup> as explicitly noted in Vietnam’s Defense White Paper:

Vietnam considers as important the strengthening of defence cooperation with ASEAN countries on the basis of defence-security cooperation mechanisms in the process of building the ASEAN Community. [...] In this spirit,<sup>29</sup> Vietnam’s Ministry of National Defence has proactively taken part in multilateral defence cooperation mechanisms with ASEAN countries by participating in ASEAN defence meetings at all levels, exchanging experience in defence building, fighting against transnational crimes and terrorism, participating in such humanitarian operations as natural disaster relief and prevention, and sending observers to military exercises (...)<sup>30</sup>

Finally, for Vietnam, another utility of its ASEAN membership is related to its complex relations with China. ASEAN has to some extent increased Vietnam’s diplomatic room for maneuver when dealing with China and its actions toward the Vietnamese claims in the South China Sea.<sup>31</sup> Vietnam’s initial hope was to set its territorial disputes with China over the South China Sea in

a context of a multilateral dispute involving Beijing and ASEAN. Cold War historian Ang Cheng Guan argued in 1998 that “Vietnam’s best and perhaps only solution in order to pre-empt a fait accompli in the Spratlys is to depend on ASEAN support and to ‘internationalize’ the issue as much as it possibly can”.<sup>32</sup> This objective was partly achieved when the ASEAN foreign ministers and China’s Vice Foreign Minister, Wang Yi, signed a Declaration on the Conduct of Parties (DoC) in the South China Sea on the side-lines of the ASEAN summit in Phnom Penh in 2002. Yet Vietnam was forced to accept some important concessions at that time. It had demanded that the declaration include a commitment not to build new structures on the islands, which was rejected by China. Vietnam had also insisted that the Paracel Islands be mentioned. The declaration eventually made no reference to its specific geographical scope, as China opposed any mention of the Paracels.

Hence, ASEAN has provided Vietnam with an institutional vehicle to internationalize its territorial dispute over the South China Sea with Beijing, but it has become apparent over the years that the benefit of this multilateral process has its limits. China’s actions continue to influence Hanoi’s expectations of ASEAN. China under Xi Jinping presents a more urgent threat to Vietnamese interests in the South China Sea than at the time it first joined ASEAN in 1995. Yet the regional body is arguably more divided than ever on this issue. ASEAN has sought to establish a conflict management mechanism that includes all ten ASEAN members and China through the negotiation of a binding Code of Conduct (CoC) for the South China Sea. The difficult negotiation of a CoC with Beijing has, in part, been further complicated by increasing Sino-US competition.<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, ASEAN members have themselves been split over the South China Sea due to China’s deepening economic and diplomatic ties with individual member states – especially Cambodia and Laos – which have become more inclined to endorse Beijing’s preferences. As a result, Vietnam increasingly looks beyond ASEAN for support, to partners like the United States, Japan and Australia. It should be noted however that all these states are ASEAN dialogue partners and members of the EAS that the regional body continues to organize annually. The utility of ASEAN as a strategic platform to interact with key dialogue partners therefore remains. It is also unsurprising that Vietnam has become the member-state, alongside with Singapore, that most actively seeks to advance relations with the dialogue partners, and in turn to advance the diplomatic value of ASEAN in the eyes of external partners.

### **Any Sign of Sectoral Leadership?**

ASEAN does not assume formal leadership and Indonesia – traditionally closest to such a position – has only been seen as a *de facto* leader by the virtue of size rather than by authority or legitimacy. When it comes to Vietnam, it is important to first assess how Hanoi regards its own leadership potential in ASEAN before discussing how its role has evolved since its successful chairmanship in 2010. Vietnam has been disinclined to take up a formal leadership position within ASEAN for multiple reasons. First, ASEAN in general is reluctant to accept any one as a default leader. Likewise, cognizant of its diplomatic history, Vietnam is averse in taking “front-row heat” in regional matters. Vietnam’s focus on sustaining economic growth has determined its macro-policies since the early 1990s. Hanoi is aware that it is lagging behind many economies in ASEAN and has been referring itself as a “developing economy”. There are however a number of issues that are of high priority for Hanoi and where it has been ready to push the agenda. This section reviews Hanoi’s diplomatic efforts in the area of international security and assesses whether Vietnam has started to play a leading role in that area.

Officially, Vietnam rarely takes credit for ASEAN initiatives; yet, privately, those involved in ASEAN affairs are convinced of Hanoi’s key role especially in the area of security. The common view among Vietnamese policymakers is that the country has displayed its leadership for years and that this has been demonstrated in some issues that define ASEAN today. They include creating the ASEAN 10 – Vietnam played an instrumental role in pushing for expansion of the membership to Laos, Cambodia and Myanmar. Another contribution was “making the region nuclear free” through

the adoption of the Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone Treaty (SEANWFZ) signed in 1995. For example, a Vietnamese retired diplomat claims that the original ASEAN members would not have declared the nonproliferation protocol had it not been for Vietnam declaring it first.<sup>34</sup> The story behind the enlargement process and the nonproliferation efforts in ASEAN is complex, yet Vietnam effectively worked toward reassuring and building trust among former Southeast Asian adversaries and committing to the ASEAN principles. Beyond the initial phase of reconciliation and the end of polarization in Southeast Asia, Vietnam's footprint in the process of ASEAN integration seems to be deeper than often acknowledged in the literature. According to another practitioner:

Had it not been for Vietnam, do you think the ASEAN FTA would have come to effect? Had it not been for Vietnam, would a Declaration of Conduct have been finalized? Expanding initiatives, not only of the ASEAN membership but also of the external dialogue partners, including the ASEAN Plus Six and then the ADMM Plus, were initiated by Vietnam. We pushed very hard for that.<sup>35</sup>

While the recognition of one's own contribution is subjective and crediting any individual member state with the accomplishment of region-wide milestones ignite debates, such conviction reflects Hanoi's perceived contribution to, and certainly initiative in, ASEAN. In Vietnam's latest 2019 Defense White Paper, references to ASEAN underline the multilateral value of defense diplomacy. In particular, attention is given to the value of external partners and their involvement in the ADMM+, which as mentioned above Vietnam credits itself for initiating.<sup>36</sup>

Nevertheless, for years, Vietnam was reluctant to play a more influential role within ASEAN for multiple reasons that include its preference to focus on domestic economic development and a lack of experienced diplomatic staff on ASEAN affairs when compared to the founding members. While these factors remain, there are some priority issues which Hanoi do not shy away from and where it has increasingly endorsed a sectoral leadership position; namely, the South China Sea dispute and the engagement with Cambodia and Laos, within and alongside the ASEAN framework, in response to Chinese rising influence in continental Southeast Asia. The evolution of these two aspects needs to be explored to discuss Vietnam's changing role in ASEAN in recent years.

One central pillar of Vietnam's South China Sea strategy is to internationalize the dispute to reduce the asymmetry of power with China as well as to enforce a peaceful and rules-based resolution of the conflict. However, the initial expectation that ASEAN might act as a strategic buffer<sup>36</sup> or as a means to advance regional claims vis-à-vis China has turned out to be an illusion.<sup>37</sup> Following the failure of the ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting in July 2012 to issue a joint communique due to differences over the South China Sea issue, there has been a growing perception in policy circles that ASEAN is no longer able to play a central role in regional security affairs. The Philippines had insisted on a reference to the incident between Manila and Beijing at Scarborough Shoal earlier in 2012 but Cambodia, that year's ASEAN Chair, refused on the grounds that the territorial disputes with China are bilateral. Since 2012, the number of incidents involving ASEAN claimants' standoff with China have received limited and reluctant group backing. This was the case in the 2014 HYSY-981 crisis when China deployed the oil rig to the waters within Vietnam's claimed exclusive economic zone (EEZ).<sup>38</sup> ASEAN's careful reaction to the Philippines' victory in the International Tribunal's ruling in 2016 further illustrated how little regional solidarity there was over the South China Sea issue. A harsh assessment came from American academic Donald Emmerson who noted that "China is pushing the organization toward impotence, irrelevance, and eventual acquiescence in the regional primacy of Xi Jinping's Beijing".<sup>39</sup>

Vietnam is currently – after the Philippines' drastic policy change since Rodrigo Duterte came to power in 2016 – the only ASEAN member actively and consistently resisting China's military presence in the South China Sea. Vietnam's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) has criticized the deployment of Chinese strategic bombers and other military platforms in its constructed features in the disputed waters.<sup>40</sup> Vietnam has also openly challenged Chinese assertive behavior in the context of the negotiation of a CoC for the South China Sea. In 2016, soon after the international ruling, then President Tran Dai Quang spoke at the Singapore Lectures and called on ASEAN to stand up to

its multipolar, multi-layered regional architecture and play a central role in the resolution of the South China Sea dispute to satisfy the interests of all parties involved.<sup>41</sup> Since then, Vietnam has been increasingly vocal in advocating for ASEAN's unity to preserve its relevance as a regional security actor.

Vietnam is concerned that other Southeast Asian claimants, like the Philippines under Duterte, may seek alternative arrangements to settle the dispute with China outside of an ASEAN framework, which would effectively undermine any multilateral approach to managing the conflict.<sup>42</sup> Vietnam has therefore become the persistent voice within ASEAN to push for the South China Sea issue to be put on the agenda and discussed as a matter of regional concern affecting Southeast Asian security. This can be contrasted to other member states that have preferred to address the South China Sea issue bilaterally with Beijing. Increased economic dependence on China has given Beijing additional diplomatic leverage over most Southeast Asian countries. For example, as a major recipient of economic aid from China, Cambodia has sought to appease Beijing by refusing to discuss the South China Sea issue at ASEAN meetings; the 2012 meeting being only one example. Moreover, Philippine President Duterte has repeatedly mentioned that the South China Sea dispute should not be addressed multilaterally but bilaterally with Beijing, which stands contrary to Vietnam's strategy.

In response, Vietnam has steered the diplomatic negotiations on the CoC and rejected compromises and a watering down of the common ASEAN position on the South China Sea issue. For example, Le Thi Thu Hang, spokeswoman at the Vietnam Foreign Ministry, said: "(...) negotiations on the CoC had made some progress recently with Vietnam actively participating and other countries showing their constructive and cooperative spirit ... Vietnam wishes related countries to continue their efforts and make a positive contribution to the negotiation process in order to achieve a substantive and effective CoC".<sup>43</sup> Vietnam therefore views itself as taking a leading role in defending the ASEAN redlines in the ongoing CoC negotiations. Notably, Vietnam did not pursue an active position during the negotiation of the CoC in the late 1990s and early 2000s.<sup>44</sup>

Linked to the South China Sea issue, Vietnam has focused in recent years on a second priority; namely, the further engagement of Cambodia and Laos and continued efforts to socialize them within the ASEAN structures in an attempt at preserving the unity and cohesion of the regional body in light of a more assertive China. The latter's economic and diplomatic might can draw individual countries away from ASEAN as well as other partners. Until recently, Vietnam was the largest investor in both countries before being overtaken by China. Acknowledging that disparity, Vietnam still continues to have a significant diplomatic and economic influence in Cambodia and Laos. Its role remains significant given the geographical proximity and continuous bilateral and trilateral relations. Recognizing the Chinese challenge, rather than letting go, Vietnam has stepped up its engagement with Cambodia and Laos in recent years to reestablish its position with its immediate neighbors as well as to socialize them to ASEAN diplomatic practices and norms.<sup>45</sup> Hanoi is currently putting additional efforts into sustaining its long-term relations with its neighbors and preventing them from breaking away from itself and ASEAN. Such diplomatic efforts are not only meant to strengthen bilateral relations and promote Vietnam's investment interests in its neighboring markets, but also to stress the need to uphold the principles and norms of ASEAN as well as sustaining unity and solidarity within the regional grouping.

The increased number of bilateral visits has been noticeable since 2016, and particularly 2018.<sup>46</sup> That year, Vietnam hosted Cambodia's Prime Minister Hun Sen.<sup>47</sup> Within a few months, King Norodom also paid a visit to Vietnam, while Vietnamese high representatives, including Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc and Defense Minister Ngo Xuan Lich, visited Cambodia. Vietnam is currently Cambodia's 5<sup>th</sup> largest foreign investor with some 210 investment projects worth 3.3 USD billion in registered capital. Cambodia's investment in Vietnam has also witnessed an increase with 18 active projects worth 58 USD million. A similar trend has been observed in Vietnam's engagement with Laos. Some 300 visits occurred in 2018, including Vietnam's Prime Minister Phuc visiting Laos in February 2018 and Laotian General Secretary and President Bounnhang Vorachith traveling to Hanoi in July 2018. Economic ties have deepened with a 13 percent increase in trade



volume and Vietnam announcing eight new projects worth 95.2 USD million in Laos. As the *Diplomatic Bluebook 2018* indicated, two priorities for Vietnam's foreign policy have been to "consolidate the special solidarity and political trust with Laos through cooperation in all areas" and to "strengthen the traditional friendship and promote effective cooperation with Cambodia."<sup>48</sup> Finally, at the trilateral level, regular Cambodia-Laos-Vietnam Development Triangle Summits (CLVDTS) provide Hanoi with an opportunity for informal talks with the leaders of Cambodia and Laos. In 2018, Hanoi hosted the 10th anniversary of this sub-regional initiative which contributes to narrowing the development gap.<sup>49</sup> This demonstrates Vietnam's sub-regional influence that contributes to ASEAN's larger goal of preserving its unity and solidarity in Southeast Asia.

Aware of the inherent weakness of ASEAN, Hanoi still chooses to work within the organization's institutional framework. While seeking to adopt a leading position on the South China Sea issue and the further engagement of Cambodia and Laos, Vietnam has adjusted its expectations toward the regional body. Vietnam is aware of ASEAN's weakness that derives partly from its decision-making mechanism based on consensus and that it cannot rely on the regional body to defend its national interests. For instance, Hanoi no longer views ASEAN as a panacea against Chinese assertiveness in the disputed waters of the South China Sea or its rising influence in Laos and Cambodia. A senior officer in Vietnam's Ministry of Defense sums it up, stating that "We no longer expect ASEAN to work for our interests; but at least not to work against us."<sup>50</sup> Hanoi is therefore adjusting its expectations toward ASEAN as an influence multiplier but it still hopes to prevent a situation where Beijing could utilize existing divisions within the grouping to exert additional influence over Southeast Asia.

Hence, despite its shortcomings, the importance given to ASEAN in Vietnam's foreign policy remains. The theme of its ASEAN chairmanship in 2020 is "Cohesive and Responsive", which speaks to the challenges of keeping ASEAN united in a changing strategic environment. Vietnam's key priorities in 2020 include "unity and solidarity", "partnership" and "institutional capacity", among others. Playing a central role in ASEAN is seen by MOFA as an opportunity to strengthen Vietnam's diplomatic maturity as well as to preserve ASEAN's own reputation and unity as a regional player. Vietnam values the ASEAN framework and seems more than ever ready to play an influential role in the regional body especially when it comes to security matters. A former Ambassador to Vietnam explains: "There has been a fundamental change in Vietnam's strategic personality. It has accepted mentally that it needs to lead ASEAN. It may have done that reluctantly, but it has accepted the leadership role."<sup>51</sup>

Significantly, the ASEAN chairmanship in 2020 also marks the tenth anniversary of the ADMM+ framework, to which Hanoi has remained strongly committed to. Vietnam wants to elevate the ADMM+ meetings from a biannual to an annual frequency. In many ways, the ADMM+ represents ASEAN's biggest asset for Vietnam – the involvement of extra-regional middle and major powers alongside the ASEAN states in defense diplomacy. Initiatives proposed by Vietnam in 2020 include establishing direct hotlines between ASEAN and Chinese Defense Ministers, organizing the first ASEAN-China Young Officers' Exchange Program in Vietnam, and creating a joint working group between the ASEAN members and China. Such initiatives illustrate Vietnam's ambition to shape multilateral defense diplomacy in the region.<sup>52</sup>

## Conditions for Sectoral Leadership in ASEAN

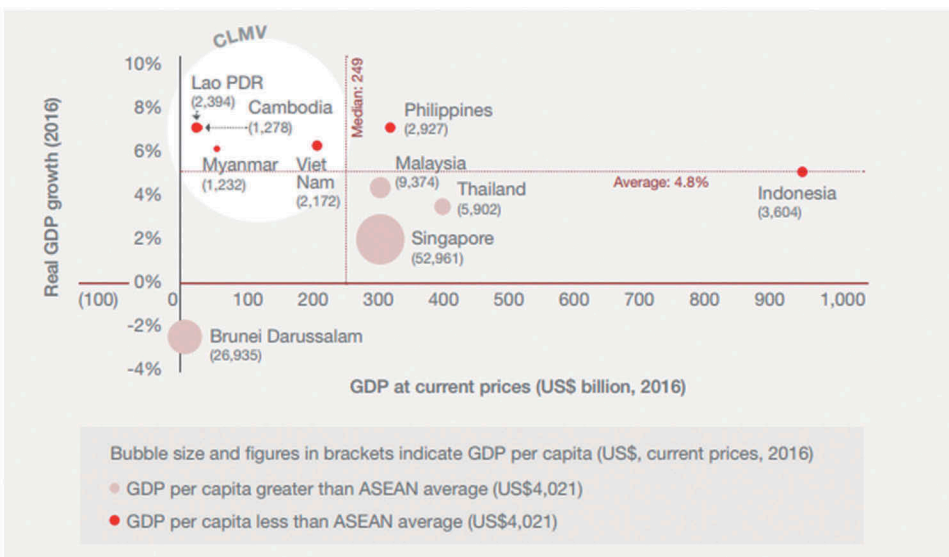
Vietnam's role in ASEAN has gone through a significant transformation since 1995 moving from inactive participation, to the achievement of specific objectives in terms of ending Vietnam's diplomatic isolation and attracting foreign direct investments, and now arguably, to a sectoral form of leadership in security matters, especially in the context of the South China Sea dispute and an ambition to keep Cambodia and Laos out of a Chinese orbit.

One should assess four key conditions to better evaluate Vietnam's potential to take up a leading security role in ASEAN in the coming years. Its sectoral leadership will ultimately be dependent on

a combination of material and normative factors that are essential to any form of leadership. This section argues that Vietnam's leading role within ASEAN is going to depend on its own commitment to the Association based on a perception of its rising utility, whether Vietnam has the socio-economic means to play such a role, if other members are comfortable with Vietnam doing so, and finally on the evolving geopolitical circumstances.

Vietnam's commitment to ASEAN has been discussed in the previous sections. The country has not pursued multilateral strategies completely outside of an ASEAN network, nor has it positioned itself as one of the rising Asian powers along with China, India and others. Instead, Hanoi considers ASEAN as the appropriate diplomatic and economic platform to position Vietnam regionally. Hanoi continues to benefit directly from the regional body in terms of its own active foreign policy and attempts to attract foreign direct investments. In short, for Vietnam, the value of ASEAN still outweighs its shortcomings. Over the years, Vietnam has become a strong promoter of ASEAN – arguably one of the most enthusiastic among the group. Moreover, Vietnam's active diplomacy and attractive trade and investment environment attracts more engagement from outside of the region, adding to the attractiveness of ASEAN as a whole. Vietnam has moved from being the beneficiary of ASEAN integration to a member whose engagement benefits ASEAN itself. This suggests that Hanoi will continue to invest in the strategic relevance of ASEAN and play a leading role in its cooperative process in the near future.

Second, the positive trajectory of Vietnam's macro-economic development in relations to other ASEAN neighbours is explained in [Figure 1](#). Stable economic conditions are a prerequisite for a sectoral leadership position even in security matters. Vietnam was initially bungled together with the second tier of ASEAN countries (often labeled as “CLMV countries” – abbreviation for Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam) to which different deadlines apply when it comes to economic integration.<sup>53</sup> Over the years, Vietnam's positive economic performance has narrowed its own development gap with the ASEAN 6 economies (Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand) compared to the other CLM group. Moreover, a sectoral leading role in ASEAN should not be associated with a broad type of leadership that tends to be more dependent on economic might. Instead, sectoral leadership will continue to be issue-specific and self-driven rather than nominated.



**Figure 1.** Size and growth of ASEAN economies.

**Source:** Future of ASEAN: Vietnam Perspective, PwC Report 2018<sup>2</sup>

The ASEAN membership is not a divisive issue within the Vietnamese political leadership. Its perceived value remains widely recognized also in economic terms. Paradoxically, the economic value of ASEAN today for Vietnam is arguably less significant, compared to the early period of its membership when Vietnam was in the primary stage of economic reforms, entering global markets and in urgent need of foreign direct investments. Likewise, the financial cost of exercising influence in ASEAN is now lower as the Vietnamese economy has sustained significant growth over the last decade and become increasingly competitive and integrated in the global economy. Hence, like Vietnam's commitment to ASEAN, Hanoi likely meets the second condition to play a sectoral leadership role as it has the growing economic means to do so.

Third, beyond material factors, it is essential for Vietnam to dispose over the necessary normative attributes in terms of legitimacy and persuasion in order to exert some form of sectoral leadership in ASEAN. Such a normative factor touches on the working norms and structures of the regional body. ASEAN continues to operate as an inter-governmental organization that adheres to the basic principles of the UN Charter, especially the principles of sovereignty and noninterference in the affairs of other states. Furthermore, ASEAN does not promote a particular political system and rests instead on the notion of "unity in diversity". Vietnam is comfortable with ASEAN's traditional norms and principles and it rejects any form of external interference in its internal affairs. Hanoi has on multiple occasions opposed proposals to alter this cardinal principle of the Association. Like most other members, Hanoi continues to view its ASEAN membership as a means to strengthen its state sovereignty and it wants the regional body to operate based on its own principles and norms as captured in the TAC of 1976.

Nevertheless, Vietnam could face a level of contention from other members for which the communist threat was real (all of the original members) as well as for those who remember vividly Vietnam's hegemonic ambitions in Indochina. History and ideology may also be a factor within Vietnam itself, as the Vietnamese Communist Party continues to have privileged relations with its counterpart in China. Thayer suggests that the "old political thinking" based on two recurring issues; "the US seek to undermine Vietnam's socialist system through 'peaceful evolution', and the socialist ideology link that binds China and Vietnam", continues to inhibit Vietnam's pursuit of proactive integration.<sup>54</sup>

While the Vietnamese role in ASEAN has gone through the largest spectrum of change among all the member states, its rising influence in the regional body may still generate some concern in other ASEAN capitals. Vietnam's military history puts forth the question of whether Hanoi aspires to a limited leadership role in ASEAN and whether such a role would be acceptable to its fellow members. Vietnam has in the past exercised coercive power in Southeast Asia when it asserted its "hegemonic" ambition through the occupation of Cambodia during the Cambodian Conflict.<sup>55</sup> Moreover, a level of apprehension toward Vietnam has existed historically in Thailand given the competition between the two countries over dominance in the mainland of Southeast Asia.<sup>56</sup> Vietnam's strategic importance in the region is not new – yet fear persists that Vietnam might seek to regain its former stature. That said, the historical legacy may be a lessening issue as ASEAN is undergoing a generational change and a political transformation among a number of its members.<sup>57</sup>

The last condition is an external one to ASEAN's membership and structure and it may well be the most challenging one for Vietnam to play a leading security role in the organization. Vietnam's sectoral leadership role is ultimately dependent on whether it is capable of successfully exercising influence in ASEAN amid the rising tension between the United States and China. While relations between the two great powers have become more competitive, ASEAN has found it much harder to restrict their involvement and interference in Southeast Asian affairs. Not being forced to choose between Washington and Beijing has become a Southeast Asian mantra in recent years. The prospect for Vietnamese leadership in security matters will be tested during the 2020 chairmanship. Hanoi needs to balance between advocating its own national interests, for example in negotiating the CoC for the South China Sea, and its role as ASEAN Chair where it is expected to display leadership and neutrality. This is challenging given the worsening strategic environment and diverging national interests across the ASEAN members. Great power competition narrows Vietnam's room for

diplomatic maneuver and further complicates uniting the ASEAN members around geopolitical considerations. A retired Vietnamese diplomat notes that the “expectation will be truly on the leadership of initiatives – including the key contentious issues. The chairmanship comes at the peak of geopolitical shifts, great power competition, potentially a very important and volatile year not only for the region, as this is the time when there are shifts in the global order.”<sup>58</sup>

The main objective of Vietnam’s chairmanship is to preserve ASEAN’s unity and solidarity and prevent further erosion. The high expectations from the other ASEAN members and dialogue partners reflects a level of confidence in Vietnam’s diplomatic capability. Yet, such expectations carry some risks and may ultimately backfire. For example, some fellow ASEAN states welcome Vietnam’s strategic leadership and strong voice on the South China Sea dispute, while others are apprehensive of Hanoi taking a confrontational approach toward China that would complicate broader relations with Beijing. Moreover, despite arriving at the China-ASEAN Single Draft Negotiating Text of the Code of Conduct in the South China Sea completed in 2018, Hanoi has opposed rushing into a meaningless CoC for the South China Sea. Vietnam remains clear-minded about the substance of the CoC and is unwilling to make compromises for the sake of a premature diplomatic announcement. This could become a thorny issue if Beijing succeeds in gaining a buy-in from other ASEAN states to settle on a less meaningful document.

## Conclusion

The paper has discussed the issue of leadership from the perspective of self-driven initiatives adopted by a single member state. The type of leadership under study has been sectoral rather than broad in its approach and seen as the ability to manage specific security issues and preserve some form of unity among the ASEAN members in response to geopolitical transformations. Within that narrow framing of leadership, the paper recognizes Hanoi’s diplomatic efforts as a form of sectoral leadership focused on the South China Sea issue, keeping Cambodia and Laos engaged in the regional body as well as upholding the relevance of ASEAN as a regional security actor. Vietnam has focused its efforts on international security, particularly in the area of maritime territorial disputes with China, and on enhancing the ASEAN engagement of Cambodia and Laos in response to China’s rising influence in continental Southeast Asia. In line with the Realist school of thought, this paper has argued that Vietnam’s form of sectoral leadership has been self-interested and based on the preservation of its own national security. Yet Hanoi faces a series of impediments to exert influence in the group that are likely to persist due to an enduring trust-deficit within ASEAN and rising great power competition.

Nevertheless, Vietnam remains committed to, and invested in, ASEAN for the same reason that led Hanoi to join the regional body in 1995; to be part of a diplomatic grouping of neighboring countries. After 25 years of membership, Hanoi has adjusted its expectation of ASEAN but its primary purpose in joining the regional body remains valid. The country’s diplomatic capacity has also expanded significantly, as has its role in the organization. Vietnam is concerned that ASEAN’s usefulness may now be undermined by great power rivalry and internal disunity driven by a divergence of national interests and strategic outlooks. Hanoi is keen to preserve ASEAN’s role in security and international affairs and to invest more diplomatic capital in the regional body. Ultimately, Vietnam’s chairmanship in 2020 will illustrate whether Hanoi is capable of taking up a sectoral leading role in the area of international security, with a focus on the South China Sea dispute, and to preserve some form of ASEAN unity despite changing geopolitical circumstances.

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## Notes on contributors

Professor **Ralf Emmers** is Dean of S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS) and President’s Chair in International Relations, Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore.

**Dr Huong Le Thu** is a Senior Analyst at Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI), Defence and Strategy Program.