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*Global Health Security:  
COVID-19 & Its Impacts*

## **Regional Cohesion in the Pandemic Era**

*By Yang Razali Kassim*

### **SYNOPSIS**

*This Friday, Vietnam hosts the first-ever virtual annual ASEAN Summit. The COVID-19 pandemic, territorial disputes with China in the South China Sea, and the US-China trade tensions have severely tested Vietnam's stewardship of the regional grouping. Adapting well to the challenges, Hanoi is living up to its chairmanship theme of cohesive and responsive ASEAN. Hanoi's ties with Singapore are also on a positive trajectory, strengthening ASEAN cooperation and progress.*

### **COMMENTARY**

IN THE 1980s, journalists covering Southeast Asia would be most familiar with a prominent foreign personality by the name of Nguyen Co Thach. He was the foreign minister of Vietnam. As its chief diplomat, Thach was the face of an ideological foe — mainland Southeast Asia's strongest country, with a battle-hardened army. A decade earlier, Vietnamese forces had defeated the mighty United States military, unifying North and South Vietnam.

Not long after that victory, Vietnamese troops had gone into neighbouring Cambodia, helping to overthrow the genocidal Khmer Rouge regime. To ASEAN, then still a five-member regional grouping, Vietnam's move into Cambodia was "a threat" to the rest of Southeast Asia. There was fear of a domino effect. After Cambodia, would it be Thailand, followed by Malaysia and then Singapore? Events over the next four decades, however, took a different trajectory.

### **Vietnam's Historic Entry into ASEAN**

This turn began when ASEAN launched a diplomatic campaign soon after, mobilising the international community through the United Nations, to oppose the Vietnamese venture into Cambodia. One of the most vocal ASEAN campaigners was Singapore's foreign minister S. Rajaratnam.

Hanoi defended its Cambodia move by accepting ASEAN's offer of diplomatic engagement. It was in the context of this series of "peace talks" that Thach frequently travelled to ASEAN. As Vietnam was increasingly isolated diplomatically at the UN, Thach stood his ground in Southeast Asia, defending Hanoi's position.

But global events were undergoing a tsunamic upheaval. In 1989, the Berlin Wall fell. Not long after, the Soviet Union disintegrated. The tectonic wave led to the collapse of the global communist order, leading to a fundamental shift in development ideology from a pure communist model to a hybrid socialist centrally-planned economy with a capitalist engine.

Against this changing global backdrop, Vietnam eventually withdrew from Cambodia, also in 1989. That was a turning point for Southeast Asia: As the Cold War's ideological standoff between communism and capitalism ended, so did the enmity between ASEAN and Vietnam.

The biggest turn of the tide in Southeast Asia was when Vietnam subsequently decided to join ASEAN, its former foe. This was soon after Vietnam launched doi moi – its own transition from a centralised economy to a "socialist-oriented market economy". In 1995, Vietnam formally joined ASEAN as Hanoi saw that its economic future lay in hitching onto the ASEAN bandwagon.

### **Vietnam Relations with ASEAN and Singapore**

Since its entry into ASEAN, Vietnam's relations with the rest of Southeast Asia have never been better. Indeed, Hanoi's membership was followed by the admission of Laos, Myanmar and Cambodia. This significantly led to the historic unification of mainland and maritime Southeast Asia.

After 25 years in ASEAN, the Vietnamese economy has developed rapidly. It is now one of the fastest growing new economies in Asia. This positive change is widely acknowledged by ASEAN leaders. One of the engines of Vietnam's rapid economic growth as an ASEAN member is its bilateral ties with the more developed ASEAN economies, especially Singapore.

It can be said that a bedrock of ASEAN's group cohesion is Vietnam's excellent and multi-faceted relations with Singapore. In 2013, the bilateral relationship was elevated to that of a Strategic Partnership.

A highlight of Singapore-Vietnamese relations was the official visit of Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc in 2018, in conjunction with the 45th anniversary of bilateral diplomatic relations. Both their leaders stressed that extensive investment and trade ties formed a key pillar of Singapore-Vietnam ties.

Singapore firms have consistently invested in Vietnam through the years. In 2017, Singapore's cumulative investment hit US\$43 billion across 1,800 projects, making Singapore Vietnam's largest investor in ASEAN, and the third-largest on a global basis.

According to Singapore-based analysts, the Vietnamese economy in 10 years' time would be bigger than the size of the Singapore economy — which is ASEAN's most developed. According to the World Bank, Vietnam is strongly positioned to benefit from numerous ASEAN and bilateral free trade agreements.

## **Vietnamese Leadership Role in ASEAN**

The first time Hanoi took up ASEAN chairmanship was in 1998 — just three years after it joined ASEAN. As its confidence grew, Vietnam took up the rotating chair again in 2010. On 4 November 2019, for the third time, Vietnam formally took over the chair from Thailand, paving the way for its stewardship of ASEAN this year.

ASEAN chairmanship is significant as it underscored the depth of mutual trust and comradeship that the rest of ASEAN has in Hanoi. It must not be forgotten that when it joined ASEAN in 1995, Vietnam was the first Communist country to join what essentially was a capitalist-driven regional grouping.

As this year's Chair, Vietnam's objective is for ASEAN to be "Cohesive and Responsive". Cohesiveness refers to Hanoi's aim to reinforce ASEAN unity and solidarity in the face of common challenges. Responsiveness demonstrates its hope to develop ASEAN resilience to shocks and crisis. COVID-19 was indeed a big shock.

The pandemic was unprecedented, wreaking havoc globally and in Southeast Asia just as Hanoi took over the rotating ASEAN Chair. COVID-19 is no doubt the toughest of three challenges.

The first is the trade war between the US and China. While the US is now one of Hanoi's most important trading partners, China is Vietnam's biggest neighbour and largest trading ally. Yet, China is also Vietnam's second toughest source of potential conflict. As ASEAN Chair, Hanoi's territorial dispute with Beijing in the South China Sea can be very demanding and tense.

As the third and biggest challenge, the pandemic is severely testing Vietnam's role as ASEAN Chair. While Vietnam has to rally ASEAN towards a common strategy to fight the deadly virus, it also has to take care of its homefront. Vietnam's firm prevention strategy eventually slowed down the spread of the disease, having just 342 confirmed cases and no deaths as of 18 June 2020. Vietnam is now touted as a model for how to successfully manage COVID-19 infection.

## **Overcoming Setbacks**

Vietnam's chairmanship suffered a setback when the COVID-19 crisis forced the postponement of the US-ASEAN Summit and the ASEAN Summit originally scheduled for April 2020. Amid lockdown conditions across the region, Vietnam hosted the first

teleconference of the ASEAN Coordinating Council Working Group on public health emergencies.

Vietnam then hosted a special virtual ASEAN Plus Three (APT) Summit on 14 April with China, Japan and South Korea, which led to a decision to set up a joint fund to fight COVID-19. At the special APT Summit, Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong emphasised how critical it was for ASEAN to mount a united response to the pandemic "because of how connected and interdependent we are".

Against the current exacting backdrop, Vietnam is hosting online the delayed ASEAN Summit this Friday (26 June). At the forefront of multilateralism and diplomacy, preparing for ASEAN and related meetings is Foreign Minister Pham Binh Minh. Interestingly, he is also the son of the former foreign minister Thach, whose birth name was Pham Van Cuong – the man at the centre of the Vietnam-ASEAN diplomatic imbroglio in the 1980s.

As Vietnam competently coordinates and marshals fellow member states to manage their challenges together, Foreign Minister Minh demonstrates Hanoi's resolve to advance a cohesive and responsive ASEAN -- ironically the same group his father once engaged in diplomatic battle with.

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*Yang Razali Kassim is Senior Fellow with the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore. This RSIS Commentary also appeared in Vietnam News Agency (VNA) and its affiliated media Bnews.vn. This is part of an RSIS Series.*

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**Nanyang Technological University**  
Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798  
Tel: +65 6790 6982 | Fax: +65 6794 0617 | [www.rsis.edu.sg](http://www.rsis.edu.sg)