Vietnam's Membership of ASEAN: A Constructivist Interpretation

NGUYEN VU TUNG

Vietnam's membership of ASEAN was driven by pragmatic reasons of economic growth, political independence and regime survival in a post Cold War environment. But in fact the learning process — which made Vietnamese decision-makers through their first-hand experiences more aware of convergent domestic and foreign policy goals between Vietnam and ASEAN — was instrumental in Vietnam’s decision to seek ASEAN membership as quickly as possible. The case of Vietnam joining ASEAN then shows that the process of socialization and interactions between Vietnam and ASEAN countries helped improve the awareness of commonalities and promoted cooperative relations. And this is one of the main arguments in the constructivist approach to international cooperation based on the self-other internalization. In this connection, Vietnam joining ASEAN was also part of a broader process in which the country forged a new state identity in the post-Cold War era: Vietnam opted for ASEAN membership to overcome an identity crisis and political isolation. The ideational approach, therefore, offers an additional and more plausible explanation for Vietnam’s decision to join ASEAN. Moreover, it helps explain Vietnam’s continued satisfaction with and commitment to membership of ASEAN.

Keywords: ASEAN membership, Vietnam, foreign policy, identity, constructivism.

It is widely accepted in Vietnam that the government's decision to join the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) was

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both timely and wise (Nguyen Phuong Binh and Luan Thuy Duong 2001, p. 192). In the absence of a detailed understanding of the organization's working procedures in Hanoi, and despite ASEAN's lack of robust institutional arrangements to promote regional cooperation (Nguyen Vu Tung 2007), the Vietnamese decision to join ASEAN in the mid-1990s reflected "the political will" of Vietnam to further commit itself to the region. What then was the nature of this political will and to what extent was it guided by material and ideational considerations? Further, what aspects of membership have been most valued by Vietnam? By posing these questions, this article focuses on the ideational logic related to the question of ASEAN membership. The central argument is that in addition to fulfilling certain material considerations, ASEAN membership also helped Vietnam overcome an identity crisis engendered by the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Moreover, this rationale still holds for Vietnamese foreign policy in the post-1995 period.

**Vietnam's Decision to Join ASEAN**

With the withdrawal of Vietnamese troops from Cambodia in September 1989, and the conclusion of the Paris Peace Accords in October 1991, the normalization of relations between ASEAN and Vietnam could proceed. Detecting genuine changes in Hanoi's domestic and international priorities, ASEAN became more proactive in engaging Vietnam with a view to admitting the country into the ranks of the organization. In 1991, for example, Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad stated that differences in socio-political systems between Vietnam and the ASEAN states would not prevent it from joining the Association. ASEAN countries thought that it was necessary to bring Vietnam into the organization in due course, for a number of reasons. First, with the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, it seemed an appropriate time to reach out to its erstwhile opponent and end the ideological divisions engendered by the Cold War. Second, as ASEAN was eager to enlarge the organization to enable it to speak for the whole of Southeast Asia, Vietnam seemed to provide a good starting point for the subsequent entry of Laos, Myanmar and Cambodia. And as a result, ASEAN would play a pivotal role in ensuring peace, stability and, to a lesser extent, prosperity in Southeast Asia and a larger role in the Asia-Pacific region. In short, Vietnam's membership of ASEAN seemed natural given the end of the Cold War and the resolution of the Cambodian problem. By July 1994, a consensus
had been reached among ASEAN foreign ministers that Vietnam should be inducted into the organization as its sixth member before the organization's summit in late 1995.

For its part, Vietnam had readily expressed its desire to join ASEAN soon after the Cambodian issue had been resolved. Conscious of the fact that it might take between five and ten years for Vietnam to familiarize itself with the "ASEAN Way" of doing business, and thus effectively participate in the organization's economic and political affairs, Vietnam acceded to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) in 1992. In February 1993 Hanoi announced that it was desirous of joining ASEAN "at an appropriate time". Fourteen months later the Vietnamese Government expressed its intention to seek "early membership". Then in July 1994 Vietnam formally took the decision to join ASEAN (Nguyen Vu Tung, 2007, pp. 53–56). Vietnam officially joined the Association in July 1995.

Since the late 1990s observers of Vietnamese foreign policy have offered several explanations concerning Vietnam's motivations for joining ASEAN. One explanation is that membership of the organization was a means of implementing the overall objective of having "more friends and fewer enemies" the task laid down in the 13th Communist Party of Vietnam's (CPV) Politburo Resolution adopted in May 1988, and subsequently in the country's foreign policy as "being a friend of all countries", which was adopted by the VII CPV National Congress in June 1991. Further, as ASEAN had established friendly and cooperative relations with the United States, Japan, the European Union (EU) and, more recently, China, ASEAN membership would facilitate Vietnam's efforts to improve relations with the Great Powers. As a direct result, by acceding to the TAC and joining ASEAN, Vietnam would be able to reduce defence spending and strengthen national security by having peace and stability in its immediate neighbourhood, thus allowing Hanoi to focus on economic reconstruction. Moreover, Hanoi believed it could improve its economic development by pursuing closer relations with the more advanced ASEAN economies. More importantly perhaps, as ASEAN cooperation is based on the free will of all its members, membership would in no way negatively affect Vietnam's independence and sovereignty (Thayer and Wurzel in Thayer 1999; Zagoria in Morley 1997, pp. 154–72). The case for Vietnam improving relations with its erstwhile opponents in Southeast Asia and joining ASEAN is an example of a foreign policy designed to better serve national economic and security interests in the post-Cold War context. Therefore, in light of these considerations, Vietnam has reaped a great deal of benefit from ASEAN membership.
In his speech delivered at the 40th Anniversary of the Establishment of ASEAN, Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung said, "Vietnam joined ASEAN in 1995 in order to ensure an environment in the region favourable for the sake of national development and prosperity. The record of membership over the last 12 years has confirmed that the decision by the Party and Government to join ASEAN is an entirely correct one" (Vu Duong Ninh 2005).

The material approach to understanding Vietnam's membership of ASEAN is not, however, sufficient for several reasons. In the first place, the projected benefits of membership had already been gained through the process of improved ASEAN-Vietnam relations, started in the late 1980s and continued into the first half of the 1990s. Hanoi's withdrawal of troops from Cambodia in 1989, the UN-sponsored political solution to the Cambodian problem in 1991, the accession of Vietnam and Laos to the TAC in 1992, and Vietnam's improved relations with the Major Powers had removed the obstacles to the improvement of Vietnam-ASEAN relations. In fact, relations between Vietnam and individual ASEAN members, especially Thailand, Singapore, Malaysia and, to a lesser extent, Indonesia, the Philippines and Brunei had already been normalized before 1995. In addition, from 1991 (the year the Soviet Union collapsed) to 1995 (the year Vietnam joined ASEAN), Vietnam managed to find new sources of aid, trade and investment to replace that lost from the Soviet bloc, thus facilitating a smooth transition to a market economy. Therefore, even without formal membership, Vietnam had broken out of its isolation, normalized relations with all countries in Southeast Asia, and, as a result, ASEAN was no longer considered a threat by Hanoi. In November 1994, Deputy Foreign Minister Vu Khoan wrote, "With the October 1991 Paris Agreement on the overall political solution to the Cambodia problem, the key obstacles to Vietnam-ASEAN relations over the last 10 years was [sic] removed. Relations between Vietnam and ASEAN members could thus rapidly develop bilaterally and multilaterally" (Vu Khoan 1995, p. 31). In other words, membership of ASEAN did not radically alter the dynamics of Vietnam-ASEAN cooperation.

In the wider strategic context, there is little evidence to suggest that Vietnam sought membership of ASEAN to balance against China. Similarly, there is little evidence to show that the United States wanted to take advantage of improved relations with Vietnam, or Vietnam's membership of ASEAN, to balance China. Between 1991 and 1995, Vietnam — in addition to joining ASEAN — normalized relations with both China and the United States. Therefore, Vietnam's
improved relations with the United States, China, and the ASEAN countries weaken the realist argument that Vietnam's membership of ASEAN was aimed at balancing China and checking its ambitions in the area (Nguyen Vu Tung 2002, pp.106–20).

Even in economic terms, Vietnam-ASEAN relations had been stabilized before Vietnam joined the organization. In 1994, ASEAN countries accounted for 30 per cent of Vietnam’s total foreign trade, and 30 per cent of foreign direct investment (FDI). Indeed the level of economic interaction between Vietnam and its ASEAN partners *shrunk* after it had joined the organization with the onset of the 1997 Asian financial crisis. In 2003, trade with ASEAN countries had dropped to 20 per cent of Vietnam’s total trade (Nguyen Phuong Binh and Luan Thuy Duong 2001, p. 192). Investments from ASEAN in 1997 accounted for 23.4 per cent of total foreign investments in Vietnam. This figure fell to 17.6 per cent in 1999 rising to about 20 per cent by 2007. Moreover, membership of ASEAN posed other economic problems for Vietnam’s, such as widening trade deficits as shown in Table 1, greater competition from the more advanced

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Exports (US$ Billions)</th>
<th>Imports (US$ Billions)</th>
<th>Total (US$ Billions)</th>
<th>Balance of Trade (US$ Billions)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>1,112</td>
<td>2,378</td>
<td>3,490</td>
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<td>1996</td>
<td>1,364</td>
<td>2,878</td>
<td>4,252</td>
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<td>1997</td>
<td>1,911</td>
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<td>1998</td>
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<td>1999</td>
<td>2,463</td>
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<td>2000</td>
<td>2,612</td>
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<td>2001</td>
<td>2,551</td>
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<td>2002</td>
<td>2,426</td>
<td>4,770</td>
<td>7,196</td>
<td>-2,344</td>
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<td>2003</td>
<td>2,958</td>
<td>5,957</td>
<td>8,915</td>
<td>-2,999</td>
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<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>3,874</td>
<td>7,766</td>
<td>11,640</td>
<td>-3,892</td>
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(3): Vietnam’s exports to ASEAN countries as a percentage of its total foreign trade.
(5): Vietnam’s imports from ASEAN countries as a percentage of its total imports.
(7): Vietnam’s trade with ASEAN countries as a percentage of total foreign trade.
(9): Vietnam’s trade balance with ASEAN countries as a percentage of total foreign trade.
economies in ASEAN, and greater pressures for economic and administrative reforms due to Vietnam's commitment to the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA). Vietnam believed that ASEAN membership had brought about "new difficulties and challenges in the course of economic development". Therefore, in economic terms, there was no real pressing need for Vietnam to join ASEAN.

A Constructivist Interpretation of Vietnam's Membership of ASEAN

As mentioned above, Vietnam opted for early membership of ASEAN. As the process of joining ASEAN was not as long or as complicated as had been predicted, it is more plausible to investigate the Vietnamese decision to join ASEAN from another perspective, namely from the way Vietnamese leaders changed their perceptions about ASEAN, and specifically a greater willingness to see the similarities between Vietnam and its ASEAN neighbours. Naturally, of course, membership would have to serve Vietnam's specific economic and security interests as well. However, as argued earlier, economic and security benefits flowed from Vietnam's decision to withdraw its troops from Cambodia and accede to the TAC, and not from ASEAN membership per se. In other words, an ideational/constructivist approach may provide an additional perspective on Vietnam's decision to join ASEAN and its satisfaction as a member thereafter (Nguyen Vu Tung 2002, pp. 106–20). This approach might be more illuminating, since in the past ASEAN was perceived negatively by Vietnam as being totally different in terms of the member states' political structures and foreign policies. This was considered the main reason behind Vietnam's missed opportunity in improving relations with ASEAN in the mid-1970s (Nguyen Vu Tung 2006). In contrast, in the early 1990s, Vietnam's perceptions regarding ASEAN became more positive, and Hanoi was more willing to join the organization as a result.

Increased Interactions and Better Understanding about ASEAN

National interests, according to certain International Relations theories, relate to the survival of states existing in an anarchic environment (Jervis 1995, 1998; Keohane 1984; Morgenthau 1985; Waltz 1979, 1990). Yet, as has been argued, the nature of international politics in the Third World has more to do with the survival of ruling regimes that act in the name of their countries (Job 1992, p. 13; Collins 2000,
p.91; Ayoob 1992, p. 77). The case of Vietnam in this period is no exception. By the late 1980s, when Vietnam faced severe economic difficulties and resultant political challenges to regime legitimacy, and when the ASEAN states’ economic success stories had become widely apparent, the Vietnamese leadership was more willing to accept new thinking and learn from non-socialist developmental models. According to Gareth Porter, Foreign Minister Nguyen Co Thach was among the first Vietnamese leaders to study the merits of the market economy (Porter 1990, p. 1). Porter observed that the foreign minister utilized this new knowledge to initiate debate in Vietnam on the need for coexistence between capitalist and socialist systems and participation in the global capitalist economy. This led to the adoption of a resolution at the Sixth CPV Central Committee Plenum in July 1984 which officially laid down the task of actively participating in the global capitalist system. The resolution continued to serve as one of the most important documents concerning the policy of economic reform that was officially adopted by the CPV Sixth National Congress in 1986. The CPV Political Report argued:

The scientific and technological revolution, the globalization of production forces, and the emergence of a single world market are the major characteristics of our era, forcing all the countries to readjust their economies in order to seek and protect their optimal niches in the international division of labour. And the internationalization of production forces has led to the inevitable need for economic cooperation and peaceful coexistence among countries of different political systems (Porter 1990, p. 6).

These were acknowledgements of the ineffectiveness of the socialist mode of economic development. What Vietnam desired was to integrate into the global economy and enhance cooperation with countries of different political systems and ideologies. This was a departure from the traditional worldview of the Vietnamese leadership that had divided the world into two mutually exclusive camps (Palmujoki 1997, p. 30; Nguyen Co Thach 1992).

The Thirteenth Politburo Resolution of May 1988 introduced a new approach to security, laying greater emphasis on the internal dimensions of national security, namely, regime security. It argued that economic backwardness and political isolation represented major threats to the security and independence of Vietnam and said in part: “With a strong economy, just-enough national defence capability, and expanded international relations, we will be more able to maintain our independence and successfully construct socialism”.11 In January
1994, when the CPV held its mid-term Congress, a list of Four Threats to national security was introduced, namely lagging behind other countries in economic terms, loss of socialist orientations, corruption and red tape, and peaceful evolution. This list of threats showed that by 1994, Vietnam no longer felt isolated and the leadership perceived that their regime was less vulnerable to challenges from outside. Poverty and economic backwardness, as well as corruption, inefficiency and red tape directly challenged the legitimacy of the CPV leadership, not external threats. In addition, leaders in Hanoi believed that the threat of peaceful evolution would be less dangerous if the regime could improve the living conditions of the people and reduce corruption (Nguyen Vu Tung 2000). In other words, threats from within were seen as more dangerous than threats from without. Deputy Foreign Minister Vu Khoan wrote:

Reality in many countries has shown that the threats to security, sovereignty, and territorial integrity of a country lie within the national borders. Reality has also shown that in many cases, even without the element of foreign aggression, security and sovereignty were challenged and territories were divided because of mistakes in economic, cultural, ethnic, and religious policies. The developmental backwardness will reduce the people's belief, cause social problems, and inevitably lead to threats to security, public order, and even regime survival.

The reforms that Vietnam started were, therefore, designed to ensure economic growth and social stability to protect the regime and the ruling communist party from possible challenges from within.

Such an approach to international relations and regime survival gave rise to a new eagerness to understand ASEAN states' models of political and economic development. In late 1992, a major CPV-commissioned comparative study of political systems and regimes in ASEAN countries was completed with the following major findings:

- ASEAN governments are pro-Western and anti-communist. But they are nationalist by nature, striving to defend their national independence and make their countries strong, especially in the economic field.
- Their nation-building formula includes export-oriented market economy, limited democracy and even authoritarianism in some countries. This formula is different from the parliamentary democratic systems in the West, but is suitable in the Asian context. Thanks to this formula, most ASEAN countries have since
the 1960s gained major economic achievements, stabilized their internal situation and strengthened their ruling regimes.

The authors of the study emphasized, "The nation-building formula of ASEAN is not totally different from ours, namely planned market economy under the leadership of the Communist Party, with some commonalities in political structures and practices. Therefore, our formula, if correctly applied, will bring about positive socio-economic and political results and would strengthen the position of the Party vis-à-vis the people."15

Therefore, it was no coincidence that in 1993, the then Deputy Prime Minister Phan Van Khai stressed, "In order to win the people's hearts and their support, to strengthen and enhance the stability of the political structure, we must adopt the developmental strategy of the ASEAN models. The key task is economic growth and social progress, and they become even more urgent as Vietnam is situated in the region marked by most dynamic economic activities in the world."16 In other words, leaders in Hanoi understood that in spite of their different political systems, the Vietnamese and ASEAN governments shared a common goal: keeping the ruling regime in power.

Vietnam also had a new understanding of the ASEAN states' foreign policy goals (which is a part of the nation-building formula and is closely related to the goal of regime security). When leaders in Vietnam understood that regime survival and sustainability was an objective, they also became aware that the attainment of this goal mainly depended on economic growth, which in turn, was dependent on, among other things, peaceful relationships among regional states. In addition, Vietnam believed that peace among Southeast Asian countries was possible thanks to the common need to ensure a stable regional environment conducive to economic growth, a derivative of the regime survival objective. From that perspective, leaders in Vietnam better understood ASEAN's efforts to promote regional cooperation and peace. Deputy Foreign Minister Vu Khoan wrote in 1994:

The ASEAN countries desire for peace, stability and expanded cooperation is in keeping with our policy that tries to take advantage of the favourable international conditions and the emerging environment of peace and stability to construct and defend our country, thus realizing the objectives of building a strong country, a prosperous nation and an advanced society. The ASEAN foreign policy, therefore, is compatible with the foreign policy of diversification and multilateralization of our external relations in which the primary focus is on cooperation with countries in Southeast Asia.17
Further, Vietnam was also more appreciative of the ASEAN norms of equality among members, mutual respect, non-interference in the internal affairs of member states, non-use of force in inter-state relations, resolution of disputes by peaceful means, and decision-making by consensus. One senior researcher noted, “ASEAN countries were motivated by a strong will of independence, which is no less than Vietnam.”

Thus, understanding that equality and respect for state sovereignty were notions dear to both Vietnam and the ASEAN countries, membership of the organization became possible for Hanoi. In making the final decision to join ASEAN, the CPV Politburo stressed, “We join ASEAN in order to preserve our national self-reliance and independence” (Vu Duong Ninh 2000, p. 45).

In short, by 1994, Vietnam had gained a better understanding of ASEAN’s behavioural and procedural norms, and this knowledge greatly influenced its decision to join the organization. At first glance, it seemed that the decision to join ASEAN was made for purely pragmatic reasons of economic growth, political independence and regime survival. But facts show that the learning process — which made decision makers in Vietnam more aware of convergent domestic and foreign policy goals between Vietnam and ASEAN — was instrumental in Vietnam’s decision to seek ASEAN membership as quickly as possible.

This new awareness was gained through direct contacts and interactions. During this time, ASEAN countries accelerated the process of reconciliation between Vietnam and ASEAN, thus making it easier for the learning process in Vietnam. From the late 1980s, many ASEAN officials began visiting Vietnam. According to one account, in 1989, “all the ASEAN countries have sent delegations of officials, ranking from Deputy Foreign Minister to Deputy Prime Minister, to Hanoi. These visits have revived the political dialogues and exchanges, thus increasing the level of mutual understanding, narrowing down the knowledge gaps, building confidence, and laying the foundation for relations in the future” (Vu Duong Ninh 2000, p. 42).

The visits by Vietnamese leaders to ASEAN capitals also had an important impact on Hanoi’s decision-making process. The CPV Seventh National Congress in 1991 stated in its resolution, “We should establish relations with ruling parties in the region.” After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the CPV expanded its external relationships with the ruling parties of Malaysia (the United Malays National Organisation), Singapore (the People’s Action Party) and Indonesia (Golkar). From 1993 to 1994, all the national leaders of
Vietnam, including the CPV General Secretary, the President, the Chairman of the National Assembly and the Prime Minister visited ASEAN countries. These high-level visits, as predicted, accelerated the Vietnamese leadership’s learning process and boosted relations with ASEAN. For example, during a visit to Singapore in October 1993, Foreign Minister Nguyen Manh Cam stressed, “The visit is of great political significance. It shows that ideological differences are no longer obstacles to the development of Vietnam-ASEAN relations.”

In March 1994 CPV General Secretary Do Muoi visited Malaysia. The CPV External Relations Commission report on the visit stressed:

> The visit to Malaysia was successful. It contributed to enhancing mutual understanding and confidence, thus further promoting friendly and cooperative relations between the two countries in many fields. In the official and private talks, Prime Minister Mahathir and other national and provincial leaders were open, sincere and showed respect to us. The two sides agreed to increase cooperation in all fields.

The May 1994 visit to Indonesia by President Le Duc Anh was seen in the same way. A Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) report on the visit wrote, “more understanding about the political systems was acquired, and together with the Vietnam’s withdrawal of troops from Cambodia and reforms at home, Vietnam-ASEAN relations are becoming better and better.”

Between 1992 and 1993, in various memos making the case for Vietnam joining ASEAN, MOFA officials stressed the following points: “ASEAN basic documents do not have any point that is openly or tacitly suggestive of the anti-communist, anti-socialist and anti-Vietnamese nature of the organization. ASEAN is not aimed at opposing any other country [and] are in principle in accordance with the principles in our Party’s and State’s foreign policy.” But when Vietnam’s leaders experienced these points firsthand, Vietnam-ASEAN relations received a significant boost. MOFA’s Southeast Asia and South Pacific Affairs Department’s 1994 report noted, “1994 is the turning-point year, because Vietnam-ASEAN relations changed qualitatively. The relations of suspicion and hostility were transformed into all-sided cooperation, bilateral and multilateral”. The report especially linked the improvement of relations with the visits to ASEAN countries by Vietnam’s national leaders: “1994 is the year in which the highest leaders of Vietnam, including General Secretary Do Muoi and President Le Duc Anh, visited ASEAN countries and the CPV developed relations with the ruling parties in Southeast Asia.”
These visits had a significant impact on the Vietnamese leaders’ perceptions. Speaking in private, a Cabinet Office official said that Vietnamese leaders believed that their visits to the ASEAN capitals and interaction with ASEAN leaders helped to confirm what various reports had told them about the organization and its members. They even confided that “the ASEAN countries are more similar to us than we had thought” and “ASEAN political documents and cooperative projects have proved that ASEAN is not an anti-communist military alliance and the ASEAN countries’ objectives in terms of nation-building and external relations are 80 per cent similar to ours.”25 In short, only when Vietnamese national leaders visited ASEAN countries, held direct discussions with their counterparts and began to study ASEAN developmental models, did they become aware of the similarities and commonalities that existed between Vietnam and ASEAN. As a result, Vietnam-ASEAN relations developed rapidly and the last remaining obstacles, namely the perception about differences in political and economic systems, were overcome. According to an External Relations Commission official “the development of Vietnam — ASEAN relations through Party’s channels has been instrumental in making full political integration of Vietnam into the region possible”.26

In sum, beginning in the mid-1980s, Vietnam started to see the merits of the ASEAN model and became more receptive to the ASEAN order of regional relations. Vietnamese leaders’ first-hand experiences of ASEAN countries and interaction with their counterparts further reinforced the decision to join ASEAN. Therefore, the earlier Vietnamese perception of differences in the nature of economic and political systems in Vietnam and ASEAN countries, which complicated the process of Vietnam’s improving relations with ASEAN in the 1970s, was greatly diminished by 1994 while awareness of many similarities between Vietnam and ASEAN countries increased. Vietnam, as a result, was ready to join ASEAN. The ideational approach, therefore, offers a more plausible rationale for Vietnam’s decision to join ASEAN. The process of socialization and interactions helped improve the awareness of commonalities and promoted cooperative relations. And this is one of the main arguments in the constructivist approach to international cooperation based on the self-other internalization (Wendt 1992, 1994; Acharya 2000, 2001; Alagappa 1998; Busse 1999; Hopf 1998).

The Question of State Identity in Foreign Policy

According to a senior MOFA official, “As individuals need to be members of associations, countries cannot stay away from international
organizations and groupings."\(^{27}\) Therefore, the need to find a substitute membership became critical when the Soviet bloc, of which Vietnam had been a member for more than four decades, disintegrated. When the Soviet Union collapsed, senior leaders in Hanoi wondered what the world would look like without the Soviet Union, and how Vietnam would cope without its socialist friends: "political isolation", i.e. exclusion from international organizations and associations, was deemed a major threat by the CPV Politburo's Thirteenth Resolution. From this perspective, state identity was closely linked with membership of international groupings.

Foreign scholars of Vietnam have pointed to the importance Hanoi attached to a 'sense of belonging' and identity when discussing its decision to joint the Soviet bloc (Palmujoki 1997, 1999; Yeong 1992; Westad 1998; Pike 1987). The collapse of the Soviet bloc led to an identity crisis for Vietnam, as well as concern over international political isolation.\(^{28}\) Vietnam then needed to find a new identity by seeking membership in other communities of states. To join ASEAN, therefore, was partly to satisfy the Vietnamese need for association. From this perspective, the decision to join ASEAN was also influenced by the need to find a new state identity. ASEAN was a logical choice, because it was geographically close and had proved effective in providing a viable developmental ideology that had led to strong socio-economic development that provided a firmer ground for regime legitimacy and survival. In other words, the "association need" was another important element behind the decision to join ASEAN.

One could, however, argue that the association need was in fact based on calculations about possible and actual political and economic gains from the membership of international organizations. Discussions on the linkage between Vietnam's ASEAN membership and the benefits it brought about suggest that foreign countries seem to be more ready to improve ties with Vietnam because of its ASEAN status. Membership, therefore, became a necessary condition for interests to be gained. According to an official, Vietnam thought that if it wanted to reap "full interests, then wearing the ASEAN hat was a must."\(^{29}\) In this case, there is a close connection between identity and interest, and it would be difficult to gain the latter without the former. The point, which was made earlier, is that even in the absence of ASEAN membership, improvements in Vietnam-ASEAN relations had brought about substantial political and economic benefits to Vietnam as well as additional pressures to further reform the Vietnamese economy. But most importantly, the focus on
interests would run into trouble as one has to answer the practical question of why Vietnam decided to join ASEAN at an early date. If the need for association is taken into consideration, we can see that the logic of states seeking identity may not be influenced entirely by the logic of states seeking material interests. Joining ASEAN, therefore, helped Vietnam to cope with the identity crisis when the Soviet Union ceased to exist.

One can also argue that Vietnam’s ASEAN membership did not lead Hanoi to abandon communism, and that the communist/socialist ideology continued to exert an important influence on the conduct of the country’s foreign policy (Palmujoki 1997, pp. 30–40). This observation is accurate, but needs to be placed in a broader context. First of all, an acceptance of the ASEAN identity did not mean Vietnam had to discard its communist identity. In fact, Vietnam did not have to reject socialist principles or its political system in order to be accepted as an ASEAN member. It shows that a differentiation between domestic and external politics could be made, as Vietnam could stay socialist domestically while simultaneously cooperating with countries of different regimes and ideologies. Indeed, ASEAN countries did not make it a condition that Vietnam had to change its political system to become an ASEAN member, unlike the changes that countries in Eastern Europe had to make before joining the EU, and this was consistent with ASEAN’s core principle of non-interference in the domestic affairs of member states.30 Related to this is the fact that ASEAN itself consists of member states with widely different political systems. The admission of Vietnam into ASEAN, as well as the other new members later in the decade, only broadened the spectrum of domestic political systems in the organization (Funston 1999, pp. 217–18). In addition, membership of ASEAN does not prevent member states from engaging in other types of external relations, maintaining or gaining memberships in other groupings. In other words, a country can enjoy multiple identities, but will attach greater importance to those that best serve its policy objectives. This corresponds well with Vietnam’s policy of diversification of foreign relations since 1986; being a friend of all but prioritizing relations with neighbouring countries and Great Powers.31 Last but not least, ASEAN membership reflects substantial changes in the new Vietnamese foreign policy in which ideology, though important, plays a less important role as compared with national interests. In other words, a socialist Vietnam is pursuing a more interest-based agenda, which is at the heart of the new thinking in Vietnamese foreign policy.32 In June 1992, Foreign Minister
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Nguyen Manh Cam wrote, "we hold peace and development as pervasive objectives for all activities, including foreign affairs. These objectives must be considered as the highest and long-term national interests".33

The perception that ASEAN countries "were no different from us" suggests that Vietnamese policy makers increasingly identified with the other states in Southeast Asia, and were more influenced by the association need and the perceived commonalities with its ASEAN neighbours. The stage had thus been set for the identity-based process of Vietnam joining ASEAN. One observer has suggested that for the first time, an association of small- and medium-sized countries seems to have overcome the syndrome of being tied to alliances with the Great Powers to ensure national security and prosperity, and that:

The most noteworthy shift in Vietnam's conduct of external relations and its views of security in the past decade has been the reorientation from its intense preoccupation with big powers, to a more balanced position in which regional cooperation with other Southeast Asian states plays a significant role (Kim Ninh in Alagapa 1998, p. 454).

The process of joining ASEAN was therefore part of a broader process of forging a new state identity for Vietnam. Faced with an identity crisis, Vietnam opted for ASEAN membership to supplement the communist/socialist identity and to overcome the fear of being politically isolated. Joining ASEAN at first glance would be seen as the rational response to the changes in the post-Cold War period. Yet, deeper analyses would suggest that it was a result of a process of asserting a new state identity that subsequently materialized in the decision to join ASEAN. ASEAN membership thus became optimal to overcome the 'identity crisis.' The end of the Cold War was thus a blessing in disguise, offering Vietnam the opportunity to rethink its own identity in a new context of relaxed global tensions and growing trends towards regional political and economic cooperation (Frost 1993, p. 78).

Conclusion

It is not the intent of this article to refute the argument that material interests played a role in Vietnam's decision to join ASEAN. Instead, this article offers an additional explanation by suggesting that more emphasis should be placed on the process that led to better cooperation
between Vietnam and ASEAN. This process included major changes in Vietnam’s view about itself as well as its ASEAN neighbours, an increased awareness of shared interests between Vietnam and ASEAN as a result of increased cooperation between them prior to membership, friendly interactions and socialization (especially between ruling elites), and the formation of a new state identity. In this connection, a constructivist approach is helpful in providing a more rounded explanation for Vietnam’s decision to join ASEAN. ASEAN membership helped Vietnam overcome a residual mentality which stressed the differences between it and its ASEAN neighbours and has enabled it to look forward to the construction of a new Vietnam-ASEAN relationship based on shared interests and outlooks. The search for a new identity to satisfy the need for association was successful in 1994 when the Vietnamese leadership became aware of similarities between Vietnam and ASEAN member states. Nonetheless, this new identity did not come without material gains. By associating with ASEAN, Vietnam was able to find new sources of aid, trade and investment which had dried up with the collapse of the Soviet Union. Besides, membership helped to consolidate Vietnam’s standing in the world community, especially by placing Vietnam on an equal footing with other countries in Southeast Asia. Moreover, membership has helped secure the legitimacy of the CPV as it has been able to bring about peace, stability and prosperity to Vietnam in the aftermath of the Cold War. As Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung said recently, “With the cooperation with ASEAN, we can further consolidate an environment of peace and stability, continuously expand multifaceted cooperation with regional countries, especially in economic terms, and enhance Vietnam’s international standing, creating more conditions for Vietnam deeper integration into the Asia Pacific and global economies.” Taken together, Vietnam has benefited immensely from joining ASEAN and derives a great deal of satisfaction from being a member.

As this article has tried to demonstrate, however, part of the reason for this satisfaction can be explained by adopting a constructivist approach: Vietnam developed relations with ASEAN on the basis of adopting the ASEAN identity, and thus overcame the identity crisis caused by the collapse of the Soviet bloc to which it was a member. The urgent need to associate based on a new awareness of commonalities influenced the decision to join ASEAN. That is to say, ASEAN membership has an ideational dimension, and this helped give rise to a deeper sense of satisfaction felt in Vietnam about ASEAN.
Regional cooperation is possible because of geopolitical (i.e. realist) considerations. Yet, the constructivist approach suggests that geographical proximity also promotes awareness of commonalities and common identity that serves as an additional impetus to cooperation. Therefore, although both conflict and cooperation can be explained by the approach of state identity, constructivists tend to be more optimistic in predicting the stability of identity-based cooperation and cohesion especially at the regional level and among small- and medium-sized states (Cronin 1999; Checkel 1998; Wendt 1992). With an emphasis on a corresponding shared sense of being and a shared destiny, that is a social identity among states, international relations seem to be more stable and enduring rather than ad hoc and opportunistic as the materialistic approaches would suggest (Wendt 1994, pp. 386, 390). The case of ASEAN identity-based cooperation then allows us to hope for prolonged regional unity. The longer the period of cooperation, the more it will lead to a greater sense of identity and stronger commitment to norms and rules informed by that identity. Forty years of cooperation since the establishment of ASEAN in 1967 have ensured an ASEAN identity, an ASEAN Way and what may be described as an ‘ASEAN peace’ in Southeast Asia. This fact will also ensure that ASEAN’s regional identity and cooperation will be enduring. ASEAN leaders can thus state with a high degree of certainty, “We envision the entire Southeast Asia to be, by 2020, an ASEAN community of caring societies, conscious of its ties of history, aware of its cultural heritage, and bound by a common regional identity.”

Vietnam has remained committed to ASEAN since it joined in 1995. Even during the 1997 financial crisis, during which ASEAN's trade with and investment in Vietnam decreased, Hanoi never questioned the wisdom of its decision to joint the organization. Post-financial crisis, the decision has been validated even further. In 2000, Vietnamese Foreign Minister Nguyen Dy Nien said, “ASEAN membership increasingly provides us with the feeling of being on board (cung hoi cung thuyen) with other ASEAN countries, which promotes better mutual understanding and sympathy.” In addition, the notions of “the ASEAN family” or “the ASEAN community” have increasingly been accepted into Vietnam’s political lexicon. Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung has even referred to ASEAN as “a great family” (dai gia dinh). Such words reflect a positive attitude towards Vietnam’s ASEAN identity. Today, as the ASEAN countries endeavour to construct an ASEAN Community by 2015, the constructivist approach to regional cooperation seems even
more appropriate for Vietnam. As a result, Vietnam finds it quite comfortable in its support for and commitment to this grand project, though fully aware of challenges and difficulties that are associated with it. Vietnamese Foreign Minister Pham Gia Khiem recently said: "I want to stress that Vietnam has been doing its best to contribute in a proactive manner to the construction of the ASEAN Community."\textsuperscript{39} In conclusion, when Vietnam found that membership of ASEAN could enhance its state identity, it felt more secure and more confident to act as a member of the regional community.

NOTES

The analyses and arguments presented in this article are the author's personal views and might not reflect those held by institutions that the author is affiliated with. The author is especially thankful to the two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments and suggestions.

1 See also Nguyen Manh Cam, "Interview Given to Nhan Dan (People's) Daily," July 22, 2000.


5 Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung’s Speech at the 40th Anniversary of the Establishment of ASEAN (Dien van doc tai le ky niem 40 nam thanh lap ASEAN) Nhan Dan (People's) Daily, 8 August 2007.


9 Document coded 3917/QHQT signed by Deputy Prime Minister Phan Van Khai, in Cong Bao (17 July 1995).

10 See also Trinh Xuan Lang, “Some Thoughts about Our Policy toward ASEAN Countries and the United States between 1975 and 1979" (Mot vai suy nghi ve chinh sach ca ta doi voi cac nuoc ASEAN va doi voi My tu nam 1975 den

Tran Quang Co, Deputy Foreign Minister, wrote in 1992, “At present, the enemies of Vietnam are poverty, famine, and backwardness; and the friends of Vietnam are all those who support us in the fight against these enemies”. Tran Quang Co, “The post-Cold War World and Asia-Pacific” (The gioi va chau A — Thai binh duong sau chien tranh lanh), *IHR International Studies Review*, (Tap chi Nghien cuu quoc te) (December 1992), p. 7.


In 1996, the CPV stressed that red-tape and corruption could lead to loss of socialist directions, which in turn could lead to “peaceful evolution”. See Communist Party of Vietnam, *Documents of the VIII CPV Congress* (Van kien dai hoi VIII Dang Cong san Viet nam) (Hanoi: National Politics Publishing House, 1996), p. 79.


The Study Report on “ASEAN Political Structures and Systems,” (He thong va Cau truc Chinh tri cua cac nuoc ASEAN) in the Nguyen Ai Quoc National Political Academy Research Program coded KX 05.02 (December 1992).


Foreign Minister Nguyen Manh Cam’s speech at the 4th Fatherland Organization National Congress (Phat bieu tai Dai hoi lan thu Tu Mat tran To quoc Vietnam) *Nhau Dan Dailiy*, 15 October 1995, p. 1.


Khoan stressed in the “Vietnam and ASEAN” article, “I would like to reiterate that so far, military cooperation in ASEAN is of bilateral nature.” (p. 30).


25 Interviews by the author with the External Relations Commission (Ban Doi Ngoai Trung Uong) officials, January–February 1999.

26 Ibid. In the period between 1991 and 1994, relations with the CPV and ruling parties in ASEAN countries developed strongly. The CPV established official relations with the People’s Action Party (PAP) in Singapore and the United Malays National Organization (UMNO) in Malaysia. After Vietnam joined ASEAN, CPV-Golkar relations also improved. In October 1996, the External Relations Commission Director was sent to observe the 32nd Anniversary of the establishment of Golkar. This was the first time Golkar had invited foreign delegations to the anniversary. The CPV, PAP, UMNO, National Party of the Philippines and Democratic Party of Thailand were the only parties invited by Golkar. According to External Relations Commission officials, after 1996, Hanoi sought to establish relations with ruling parties in Thailand and the Philippines.

27 Interviews by the author with senior Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) officials, Hanoi, between 1999 and 2003.

28 Interviews by the author with senior MOFA officials, Hanoi, between 1999 and 2003.

29 Interviews by the author with Senior MOFA officials, Hanoi, between 1999 and 2003. See Foreign Minister Nguyen Manh Cam’s Speech at the 4th Vietnam Fatherland Organization National Congress, October 1995: “After considering all aspects, we hold that once we became the ASEAN observer, it is natural and logical that we will become an official ASEAN member”, p. 1.


34 It should be noted that the process was by no means a smooth one. Leaders in Vietnam had to settle internal differences in opinions and foreign policy options, due to differences in policy priorities and worldviews. An analysis of the internal debate is beyond the scope of this paper.

35 Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung’s Speech at the 40th Anniversary of the Establishment of ASEAN, Nhan Dan Daily, 8 August 2007.

36 ASEAN Basic Documents, at <http://www.aseansec.org>.
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38 Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung’s Speech at the 40th Anniversary of the Establishment of ASEAN, Nhan Dan (People’s) Daily, 8 August 2007.


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