

Vietnam's foreign policy with ASEAN: A national interest approach (1986-2020)



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ABSTRACT

In 1986, Vietnam initiated the Doi Moi policy, marking the onset of comprehensive reforms in economic, political, diplomatic, and societal dimensions. This reform agenda established a foreign policy framework prioritizing national interests. Amid the ever-evolving global and regional economic and political landscape, Vietnam proactively adapted to these shifts. Crafting foreign policies guided by the Party Congresses and Politburo Resolutions, Vietnam accentuated diplomatic ties with neighboring nations and the ASEAN community as paramount priorities. Notably, Vietnam's foreign strategies emanate from a rigorous consideration of national interests. This article conducts an exhaustive analysis of Vietnam's foreign policy vis-à-vis ASEAN, emphasizing the national interest approach during the years 1986 to 2021. Through rigorous examination and reliance on substantiated evidence, the author discerns that Vietnam's engagements with ASEAN are meticulously designed to safeguard primary, secondary, and shared national interests. Nevertheless, Vietnam encounters formidable challenges and complexities in its pursuit of these national interests within the ASEAN framework.

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1. Introduction

Foreign policy assumes a pivotal role within a nation's development strategy. It constitutes a fundamental tool, serving as the primary means through which a nation safeguards its interests across different historical epochs. The formulation of foreign policy stands as an endeavor intrinsic to all states, driven by the collective desire to preserve and advance national interests. In this pursuit, nations meticulously define their national interests as an ongoing political exercise. The crafting of foreign policy represents a common objective for all nations, a mechanism to optimize national interests while concurrently minimizing the opportunity costs inherent in each foreign relations decision. Within the context of Vietnam, the advent of the Doi Moi policy in 1986 marked a transformative phase in foreign policy, characterized by a resolute articulation of national interests. Furthermore,

Vietnam's foreign policies exhibit remarkable adaptability, adjusting synchronously with the dynamic and ever-evolving global and regional political landscape. The Vietnam Communist Party (VCP) has formulated a foreign policy underpinned by the principle of "equality of mutual benefit" in international relations, serving as a testament to Vietnam's commitment to this approach (Do, 2022). Until now, Vietnam's foreign policy is based on three main pillars, also the national interest's point of view (Hiep, 2013). Firstly, Vietnam ensures national security, sovereignty, territorial integrity, independence, and identity. Secondly, Vietnam provides unity and stability to the political system. Finally, Vietnam creates a favorable economic development environment, ensuring people's lives and enhancing national status. Vietnam's foreign policy development within ASEAN results from the renewal of Vietnam's foreign policies. During more than 30 years of Doi Moi, Vietnam has shown progress in its foreign policy: from policy to action. Vietnam has become an active and responsible member of the ASEAN. It results from adjusting, developing thinking, planning, and implementing foreign policies. Since the Doi Moi, ASEAN has become essential in creating an influence and force for Vietnam. In this scholarly work, we shall examine Vietnam's foreign policy endeavors vis-à-vis the

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ASEAN community during the period spanning 1986 to 2021, with a primary focus on the prism of national interests. The prominence of national interests within the framework of Vietnam's foreign policy has notably intensified since the inception of the Doi Moi policy in 1986. Over this transformative era, Vietnam has undertaken substantial modifications to align itself with the evolving global landscape, achieve noteworthy milestones, and confront multifaceted challenges. This study endeavors to provide a comprehensive analysis of Vietnam's engagement with the ASEAN region, accentuating the centrality of safeguarding national interests as a guiding principle. During this period, Vietnam has adeptly navigated through a myriad of international developments, deftly positioning itself to capitalize on opportunities while effectively addressing the inherent complexities and exigencies of the global arena. The examination conducted herein seeks to shed light on the intricate interplay between Vietnam's foreign policy and its unwavering commitment to the pursuit and protection of its national interests.

2. Literature review

2.1. Foreign policy and national interests

The scholarly discourse encompassing foreign policy and the pursuit of national interests is characterized by remarkable diversity. While scholars' perspectives on foreign policy exhibit variance, it is imperative to recognize foreign affairs as the intricate amalgamation of strategies, objectives, and actions undertaken by a nation in its engagement with other states. As posited by [Ahmed \(2020\)](#), foreign policy is a dynamic field entailing multifaceted interactions with foreign nations and international organizations across economic, cultural, and societal dimensions. The foreign policies of influential nations, whether regional or global, perpetually command the attention of the international community, given the profound impact of their strategies on the maintenance of peace, stability, and environmental security, both within their respective regions and on a global scale. Furthermore, within the contemporary landscape of robust global integration, it is imperative to acknowledge the substantive influence exerted by domestic political factors within a nation, as they significantly shape inter-state relations and, in turn, mold the contours of that nation's foreign policy. [Sauvant and Mallampally \(2015\)](#) also stated that domestic and foreign policies are two significant issues: protecting national security, helping that country achieve economic prosperity, and maximizing its benefits through cooperation, competition, conflict, and even war.

[Breuning \(2007\)](#) argued that a country's foreign policy was the sum of its policies and interactions with the environment beyond its borders. Foreign policy includes many economic security issues, environmental issues, energy, foreign aid, and

migration. [Modelski \(1964\)](#) also stated that foreign policy is a system of activities carried out by communities to change other countries' behavior and adapt their actions to the international environment. Thus, foreign policy can be understood as adopting the relationship between the inputs and outputs of the decision-making process and the foreign policy objectives. There are also some differences in viewpoints on foreign policy. [Holsti and Holsti \(2016\)](#) argued that foreign policy was actioned. The government is committed to maintaining or altering desirable or undesirable traits in an international environment with well-considered objectives. It combines direction, national role, goals and actions, and the primary strategies for achieving domestic and foreign goals, especially in response to permanent threats. [Rosenau \(2020\)](#) argued that foreign policy was an attempt to control the external environment by maintaining favorable and changing unfavorable contexts.

Foreign policy can be understood as a part of national policy (public policy), which synthesizes a country's regulatory measures' objectives to its international existence and development. The goals of foreign policy are to address issues related to security (territorial integrity, political independence), well-being (prosperity, economic development, happiness), honor (recognition, status, respect), ideological expansion (diffusion of values, unity), physical growth (power, territorial expansion, special access), value system (international peace, morality, and solidarity). Among the objectives set out above, ensuring national interests is also one of the goals that foreign policy aims to achieve.

National interests are an essential part of each country's foreign policy. "National interest" is a universal and throughout goal for all journeys of a country. According to [Zink \(1983\)](#), national interests were a highly generalized concept covering the nation's vital needs such as independence, territorial integrity, military security, and economic prosperity. [Said and Lerche \(1995\)](#) said that national interests were the vital interests of that state. Survival benefits include independent territorial and national integrity. The concept of national interests is used as an analytical device to define a nation's goals and a comprehensive imperative to the actions and policy incentives of the government. National interest can also be whatever a country's foreign policymakers aim for.

In Morgenthau's point of view, ensuring the national interest is gaining military and economic power and being the most significant benefit ([Pham, 2008](#)). Thus, national security is the root of the concept of national interests. National interests are divided into two basic categories: objective and subjective. National interests' objectivity includes the primary benefits that every nation needs to survive: security, independence for economic development, and reputation. The reality shows that personal benefits are the needs of each country to

ensure that their inherent objective benefits depend on different circumstances and conditions (Finnemore, 1996). Objective interests may differ, but each country has other subjective goals depending on the circumstances and conditions of pursuing objective needs.

Weldes (1996) introduced models of national interest that are still valid today. These are different types of national interests, including:

Primary interests include protecting the country's political, economic, and cultural interests from outside intrusion. All countries of the world must defend this interest at all costs.

Secondary interests include protecting citizens abroad and ensuring proper immunity for an overseas country's diplomats. This kind of interest contributed to the first interest in guaranteeing inviolable cultural, political, and economic security.

Permanent interests are national interests associated with that country's subject, such as the interests of the organization, the interests of the parties, and the working people's interests. Various interests include the interests of individuals, divisions, partisan politics, and political views. Common interests include all physical factors (territory, natural conditions, natural resources, infrastructure, people) and spiritual factors (tradition, culture, foundations ideology, superstructure, language) that guarantee development and longevity. Specific benefits are often closely identified in time and space and are the rational product of the common good.

As mentioned above, each country in the world has come up with international relations policies to ensure national interests. Since the beginning of the foreign policy implementation, Vietnam has always guaranteed to put national interests first, especially in relations with ASEAN.

2.2. Vietnam's foreign policies within ASEAN in terms of national interests

2.2.1. The period from 1986 to 1996

Following three decades of protracted conflict, Vietnam came to a profound realization that its paramount national interest lay in the establishment of a tranquil and stable environment, particularly in its relations with neighboring nations. This imperative was underpinned by the overarching objectives of fostering economic development and ameliorating the scars of war. Consequently, the normalization of relations with neighboring states emerged as an urgent and strategic necessity.

Vietnam's triumph over U.S. imperialism in 1975 catalyzed a significant transformation in inter-state dynamics within the ASEAN region. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) assumed a proactive role in fostering amicable relations among the Indochinese nations. Notably, ASEAN undertook substantial revisions to its foreign policy orientation, with a pronounced emphasis on the principles of peace and neutrality. Central to its ethos was a

commitment to fostering cooperative endeavors aimed at preserving shared peace and security in Southeast Asia. The ASEAN Charter enshrined the principles of respect for independence, sovereignty, territorial integrity, non-interference in internal affairs, peaceful conflict resolution, and a prohibition on the use or threat of force.

Nevertheless, ASEAN's opposition to Vietnam's intervention in the Cambodian crisis, culminating in the removal of the genocidal Pol Pot regime, exposed Vietnam to multifaceted security threats, economic vulnerabilities, political isolation, and reputational damage. This adversity served as a catalyst for Vietnam's diplomatic realignment and the recalibration of its domestic and foreign policies, all orchestrated to advance its highest national interests.

In 1986, the inception of the Doi Moi policy marked a pivotal juncture in Vietnam's trajectory. Faced with pressing imperatives to extricate itself from economic crises, break free from the encumbrances of imperialistic embargoes, and expand foreign relations and international integration, Vietnam embarked on a transformative journey. The 6th Congress of the VCP in 1986 heralded a seminal shift in the ideological and operational underpinnings of Vietnam's foreign undertakings.

This strategic inflection point signified Vietnam's resolute determination to achieve its paramount national interests and epitomized its readiness to engage with the world through a novel diplomatic paradigm (Hiep and Tsvetov, 2018). The VCP's Congress clearly stated that Vietnam joined the international division of labor, especially with the Soviet Union, Laos, Cambodia, and other socialist communities. Vietnam has simultaneously taken advantage of expanding economic and scientific-technical relations with third-world countries, industrialized countries, and international and foreign private organizations on the principle of equality in mutual benefit. Vietnam is also aware of its interests tied to those of the region. However, the issue of Cambodia is one of the significant obstacles in Vietnam's relations with ASEAN. In solving this issue, Vietnam has recognized the critical role of ASEAN.

Resolution 13 of the 13th VCP Politburo (1988) underscored the paramount importance of consolidating and preserving peace as Vietnam's preeminent national interest, with a specific focus on prioritizing economic construction and development. The 6th VCP Congress marked a transformative juncture for the nation, ushering in a novel era of introspection in its approach to external affairs. This included a reevaluation of the concept of "national interests" in the context of the evolving epoch.

The dynamic shifts in the global landscape prompted the VCP to reexamine its perspective on international relations and the nexus with national interests, a sentiment echoed by Fforde (1997). As Vietnam embarked on the Doi Moi policy, its

foundational changes encompassed the preservation of a peaceful and stable socio-economic development milieu as a paramount national imperative. During this period, Vietnam adroitly leveraged favorable international conditions to advance its socialist objectives. Moreover, the nation conscientiously fulfilled its international obligations guided by national interests and diplomatic strategies.

Resolution 13 of the VCP represented a pivotal realignment, serving as the catalyst for the evolution of Vietnam's foreign policy vis-à-vis ASEAN and neighboring nations. This shift formed the bedrock for the development and enhancement of Vietnam's foreign policy, characterized by its commitment to independence, autonomy, multilateralism, and diversified international relations. The late Minister of Foreign Affairs aptly noted, "The Politburo's Resolution 13 on foreign affairs epitomizes a profound transformation in our worldview, goal-setting, and the reorientation of our entire foreign policy."

Amid the twilight years of the 20th century, with the Soviet Union and the socialist system encountering crises, the synergy between national interests and international obligations assumed heightened significance. The 7th VCP Congress in 1991 delineated the external mission of upholding peace, fostering expansive cooperative relationships, especially in the economic domain, and creating conducive conditions for the safeguarding and development of the Vietnamese homeland. Concurrently, Vietnam remained committed to the global struggle for peace, national independence, democracy, and social progress, emphasizing the intrinsic relationship between national interests and international engagement (Revilla Diez, 2016). Vietnam has set development as the first goal in defining national interest while still aiming to ensure national security. In late 1991, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the socialist system greatly impacted Vietnam. Vietnam has also suffered a profound and comprehensive impact on economics, politics, and national defense from the collapse of the socialist system in the Soviet Union and Eastern European countries due to its gradual decline and loss of the primary resource of support. In 1986 - 1990, the Soviet Union gave Vietnam about 12-13 billion USD, accounting for 35% of the total Soviet aid to third-world countries. Each year, the Soviet Union aided Vietnam with about one billion USD in economics and one billion USD in the military until the mid-80s of the twentieth century (Thayer, 1989). In 1990, the Soviet Union cut its aid for strategic goods by only 50-60% compared to 1989. Aid contracts are cut by up to 60%, forcing Vietnam to find ways to sell its products to fiercely competitive international markets.

Moreover, the economic model of centralized, bureaucratic, and subsidized warfare has led to a severe socio-economic crisis. Vietnam fell into prolonged hyperinflation (774.7%) in 1986 and continued at three, then double digits until the early 1990s. The balance of payments was seriously

imbalanced; domestic production only met 80-90% of consumer demand. All accumulation and consumer funds have to rely on foreign aid and debt. Unemployment in Vietnam in this period amounted to 12.7%. The production scale was low and decreased; the population increased rapidly, and the GDP per capita was only 86 USD. Vietnam was among the world's poorest countries and has faced a socio-economic crisis (van Brabant, 1990).

Vietnam has been compelled to maintain a substantial and financially burdensome armed force due to the persisting tensions on its northern border. Hostile forces have consistently endeavored to inflict harm on Vietnam, aiming to realize their ambition of making the nation suffer, thereby posing a grave challenge that extends beyond the domestic realm. Simultaneously, Vietnam extended support to Cambodian brethren through the deployment of volunteer troops. The dissolution of the Soviet Union also precipitated a significant setback for Vietnam in the arena of foreign policy, resulting in a considerable loss of its diplomatic leverage. This disintegration placed immense pressure on Vietnam to augment its international relations, particularly in the context of border tensions.

The 3rd VCP's Congress in 1992, against the backdrop of these geopolitical circumstances, emphasized the central role of national interests in shaping Vietnam's foreign policy. As a corollary, the overarching objective of "peace and development" emerged as a pivotal benchmark in Vietnam's international engagements, consistently aligned with the best interests of the Vietnamese populace. Throughout this epoch, Vietnam successfully navigated through crises and upheaval while concurrently preserving and reinforcing political stability and advancing its socio-economic standing.

The challenges that loomed on the horizon in the years leading up to the 7th VCP Congress in 1991 were multifaceted, encompassing the intricate interplay of global and domestic dynamics. The severe crisis engulfing the socialist regime in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, along with the intricate machinations of international hostile forces seeking to undermine real socialism, was instrumental in fostering a climate of ambiguity and uncertainty. Additionally, the ideological wavering of certain segments within the global communist movement impacted the ideological orientation of a faction of the Vietnamese party cadres and members. The VCP's Resolution explicitly enunciated the guiding principles underpinning Vietnam's foreign policy, anchored in the imperatives of independence, unity, and socialism, contextually informed by the nation's unique positioning, prevailing circumstances, and the evolving global and regional milieu.

In 1990-1991, Vietnam signed nearly 40 agreements with ASEAN member countries (Pomfret, 2013). This activity creates a legal basis for the expanding cooperation relationships between Vietnam and ASEAN countries, leading to economic and trade relations (Tung, 2007). Since 1992,

Vietnam has determined to join the Bali Treaty, participate in Dialogue Forums with ASEAN, and actively study to expand ties with ASEAN (Vinayak et al., 2014). On July 22, 1992, at the ASEAN Foreign Ministers Meeting held in Manila (Philippines), Vietnam and Laos signed the agreement to join the Bali Treaty and become ASEAN observers (Cuyvers, 2019). At the 26th ASEAN Foreign Ministers Meeting in Singapore (1993), Vietnam was invited to join the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) to discuss Asia-Pacific political and security issues (Haacke, 2009).

With these achievements, on July 28, 1995, at the 2nd AMM-28 Conference and ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) held in the capital Bandar Seri Begawan (Brunei), ASEAN officially admitted Vietnam as the 7th member (Keling et al., 2011). Vietnam's accession to ASEAN has been considered an important achievement in Vietnam's foreign affairs. Vietnam has completely relieved all doubts and deadlock in regional countries; thereby, the "ideology" is no longer a significant issue governing international relations. This event is also crucial to creating a new development stage in international relations in Southeast Asia.

In the 8th Congress of VCP in 1996, Vietnam set out a strategy for industrialization and modernization until 2020. The process of industrialization and modernization must be combined with national integration. The Vietnam Communist Party's view of security interests has shifted from traditional to comprehensive security. The 8th Congress has set a development target to ensure independence, autonomy, national interests, and the advantage of favorable international conditions. With the motto of proactively integrating into the global economy with appropriate goals and roadmaps, Vietnam's foreign policy has shifted to serving the economy, linking diplomatically (Shivakumar, 1996).

The Ninth Party Congress in 2001 emphasized: "actively integrating into the international and regional economy in the spirit of maximizing internal resources, improving the effectiveness of international cooperation, ensuring independence and self-reliance and orientating Socialist." The Party Congress affirmed the necessity and assessed the nature of globalization and the opportunities and challenges for Vietnam when participating in this process.

Vietnam's new mindset on foreign affairs defines Southeast Asia's direct importance in its real innovation and peace and development policy path. This mindset also identifies that ASEAN can help Vietnam break out into the world and find political solutions to Cambodia's problem. Thus, from 1996–2006, the national interests in Vietnam's foreign policy were shaped by primary contents: successful implementation of the Doi Moi strategy, promoting social-economic development, industrialization, and modernization. All active steps in this period stemmed from placing national interests first in foreign policymaking.

2.2.2. The period from 1996 to 2006

During this period, after ten years of implementing the Doi Moi policy, Vietnam began to step out of the stage of the most severe crisis. It achieved several goals for ensuring national interests, such as socio-political stability and gradual economic recovery and development. The GDP growth rate in this period has improved. Despite the impact of the regional financial crisis (1997-1999) and successive natural disasters, Vietnam maintains a decent growth rate. The average GDP in this period reached 7%. Compared with 1990, GDP in 2000 has more than doubled. From 2000-2007, Vietnam's GDP growth averaged 7.63% per year. Vietnam has made steady strides in regional and international integration. The prestige and position of Vietnam in the region have been enhanced. Maintaining independence, autonomy, and global integration has been strengthened. From an isolated, besieged country, by 1996, Vietnam had "diplomatic relations with more than 160 countries, trade relations with over 100 countries. Investors from more than 50 countries and territories have invested directly in Vietnam" (Athukorala, 2006).

Vietnam has assumed a pivotal role in fostering regional development through a myriad of engagements and initiatives within the framework of ASEAN and its extended fora, including ARF, ASEAN + 3, and EAS. While these efforts have yielded notable accomplishments, Vietnam has also encountered formidable challenges. The intensification of market competition and the race for investment capital has thrust Vietnam into the precarious position of potentially lagging behind its regional counterparts in economic advancement. Moreover, an array of non-traditional security concerns has surfaced, adding to the perpetual threats to national sovereignty. Compounding these challenges is the relentless pursuit by hostile elements of a strategy termed "peaceful evolution," aimed at effecting transformative changes within Vietnam's socialist governance structure. This multifaceted endeavor seeks to undermine the existing regime and usher in an alternative socio-political order. Vietnam confronts these formidable challenges even as it diligently pursues its regional and international commitments, a testament to the intricate interplay between its domestic and external imperatives.

The 8th VCP's Congress in 1996 continued to propose the path of independence, autonomy, diversification, and multi-lateralization. It affirmed that "Vietnam wants to be friends of all countries in the world fighting for peace, liberty, and development." For the first time, the 8th Congress started integrating international and regional economies to build an open economy, combining with the region and the world. This start is crucial to the Party's significant and cross-cutting foreign policy of international economic integration, and ASEAN plays a vital foundation role for Vietnam in this strategy. The above-guiding mottos have shown

a substantial, objective, and comprehensive innovation in the VCP's thinking of considering national interests as the basis for identifying partners. The VCP has a flexible, dialectical concept of intertwining interests, cooperation, and struggle in relations between countries, serving as a solid foundation for strengthening ties with ASEAN.

In the 21st century, national independence is still the highest policy goal essential to national interests. However, in this period, national sovereignty must be based on globalization. Globalization makes it impossible for countries to pursue their national interests arbitrarily but consider other nations' interests. In this context, ensuring the national interests in Vietnam's foreign policy is reflected through necessary procedures such as building solid capacities by improving its competitiveness and adaptability and strengthening national security and defense potential. Vietnam has participated more deeply in international cooperation activities on national defense and security regional and global security mechanisms. Vietnam has also established and maintained a state of equilibrium in international relations with major countries, major financial and economic centers, groups, and regional water blocks with significant influence globally. Vietnam continued its strategic viewpoint throughout the Doi Moi period, prioritizing development goals, building a socialist republic, and focusing on economic development. Diplomatic activities continue by raising the slogan "diplomacy for the economy," promoting the Vietnamese economy's deeper integration into the world economy. Vietnam considers this an essential condition for development in the current country's context.

Vietnam exhibits an unwavering commitment to safeguarding its autonomy, sovereignty, and territorial integrity. The imperative of security objectives assumes paramount significance within the ambit of development aspirations, both in domestic and international arenas. The endeavor to construct and protect the Socialist Republic of Vietnam during the Doi Moi era has borne fruit, manifesting in numerous noteworthy achievements. Notable accomplishments encompass the nation's emergence from the throes of underdevelopment, the bolstering of national potency across multifaceted dimensions, the perpetual safeguarding of national autonomy and the socialist order, as well as the augmentation of Vietnam's prestige and standing in the global milieu. Nonetheless, the ongoing enterprise of constructing and defending Socialist Vietnam faces formidable impediments and challenges. Such impediments are notably posed by adversarial forces of great intensity, the reverberations of market-oriented economic influences, and, most notably, a diminishing faith among a segment of the populace in the Party and the existing regime. The adverse forces seeking to undermine the ideological foundations of the Vietnamese Communist Party today can be categorized into three principal groups. The first

group encompasses hostile elements engaged in the exploration of theoretical and practical aspects of the ideological struggle between socialism and capitalism across various international domains. The second group comprises radicalized overseas Vietnamese elements who consistently coalesce with domestic opposition and disgruntlement, resulting in the establishment of organizations such as Viet Tan, Vietnam Restoration, and the Vietnamese Dynasty. The third group comprises certain cadre members and party officials, some of whom have occupied influential positions within Vietnam's political apparatus and administrative structure. This cohort has succumbed to a degradation in political ideology, characterized by tendencies toward "self-evolution" and "self-transformation." This contingent, while not inscrutable, remains exceedingly challenging to counter, given its subtle, intricate nature. The dual mandate of erecting and safeguarding Socialist Vietnam constitutes a pair of strategic imperatives. In addition to the unwavering defense of independence and sovereignty, the perpetuation of a tranquil international milieu assumes paramount import in the context of Vietnamese diplomatic endeavors. The preservation of a climate of peace and political stability stands as an indispensable prerequisite, serving to underpin national security and facilitate rapid, sustainable developmental progress within Vietnam (Chapman, 2017).

Vietnam consistently engages proactively in global integration endeavors. The cornerstone of Vietnam's stance on global integration centers around the paramount consideration of "national interests." In this contemporary perspective, national independence is viewed as the assertion of fundamental sovereign rights, undertaken to safeguard the legitimate interests of other nations. Vietnam perceives national independence as a concept inextricably linked to principles of solidarity, international cooperation, and active involvement in regional and global integration processes. A key facet of this approach is the strategic utilization of international consensus, support, and assistance, thereby harnessing the collective goodwill and collaboration of the global community to further its objectives and national interests.

Vietnam consistently and proactively seeks to bolster its international standing, a strategic pursuit directly aligned with the nation's imperatives for security and development. An essential facet of Vietnam's national interests pertains to the objective of enhancing its influence on the global stage. Notwithstanding the persistent challenges and finite resources at its disposal, Vietnam has successfully cultivated a commendable reputation and secured a prominent position both within the regional and international milieu. The achievements stemming from the Doi Moi reform process have played a pivotal role in constructing a favorable image in the eyes of the global community, positioning Vietnam as a responsible and engaged actor. Vietnam has shouldered the role of an active and conscientious

participant in the international arena, prioritizing the overarching objective of fostering peace, stability, cooperation, and development, both regionally and on a global scale. This endeavor entails the astute cultivation and harnessing of existing resources and the strategic development of novel assets, synergizing political-economic elements and harnessing the influential potential of cultural diplomacy to further elevate its international stature (Nguyen, 2020).

2.2.3. The period from 2006 to 2020

During this period, the global context has changed direction more favorably to Vietnam and ASEAN. ASEAN has played a more prominent role in the Asian region and has become the world's most dynamic region. However, the significant challenges are that China's rise and investment in defense also pose many problems for the region's economy and sovereignty in the South China Sea and ASEAN. The investment in China's security in 2010 was estimated at 119 billion USD, ranking second in the world, only after the US. China has stepped up controversial claims in the South China Sea, such as unilaterally declaring a ban on seasonal fishing harassing and detaining Vietnamese fishers in traditional fishing grounds in Hoang Sa during difficult economic times. In the U-shaped nine-segment road map sent for circulation at the United Nations, China also officially requested more than 80% of the South China Sea area. China has declared the South China Sea was the "core interest" along with Taiwan and Tibet (2010) and regularly violated the exclusive economic zones of Vietnam and the Philippines (Shah, 2017). Moreover, the fact that China put the giant oil rig Hai Duong-981 into the low seas located deep within the exclusive economic zone and continental shelf of Vietnam is not a single, sudden event but a long-calculated and prepared action of the Chinese in the process of implementing the plot to monopolize the East Sea. China spent more than 1 billion USD over 6 years to build the giant oil rig Haiyang 981 (114) meters long, 90 meters wide, 137.8 meters high, weighs 31,000 tons, operates at a maximum depth of 3000 meters, can drill up to 12,000 meters) not only to exploit oil and gas in the East Sea but more importantly to mark China's sovereignty over the South China Sea. The placement of the oil rig HYSY-981 is not an isolated event, as it is a severe step by China to exercise its hegemony in the East Sea and Southeast Asia.

During this phase, Vietnam effectively resolved its socio-economic crisis, bolstered its standing and influence, and laid the essential groundwork for the transition into a new phase of development characterized by industrialization and modernization. Notably, Vietnam achieved a remarkable annual average GDP growth rate of 7.34% over the period spanning 1991 to 2011, situating it at an elevated level in both the regional and global context. In 2010, Vietnam's GDP, assessed at current market prices, reached a noteworthy

101.6 billion USD, marking a substantial 3.26-fold increase compared to the year 2000. The country's economic dimensions exhibited rapid expansion, with the economy's scale in 2011 being 4.4 times greater than that of 1990 and 2.1 times larger than that of 2000. Notably, the average annual growth rate during the 2001-2011 period reached an impressive 7.14%. Consequently, Vietnam successfully transcended underdevelopment and ascended to the status of a middle-income nation.

In this context, Vietnam has developed a strategy to implement a foreign policy to deepen international relations and integrate fully into the world. The 10th VCP's Congress in 2006 added several new contents compared to the 9th Congress, emphasizing the need for international economic integration not only to be "proactive" but also "active." The VCP has also highlighted the political determination to deepen, stabilize, and sustain the relationship. The ASEAN vision has identified the development of specific cooperation for the 2016-2025 period. Vietnam also promotes a core role in ASEAN's sub-regional cooperation frameworks, such as triangles, quadrilateral, CLV development area, CLMV, ACMECS, Mekong Subregion, etc. In particular, Vietnam has developed a framework for strategic partnership with critical countries which has essential roles in ASEAN, including Indonesia (2013), Malaysia, the Philippines (2015), Thailand, and Singapore (2013). The special relationship between Vietnam and Laos and comprehensive cooperation with Cambodia is tightened in all fields of cooperation. Multifaceted collaboration between Vietnam and other Southeast Asian countries has been strengthened. ASEAN member countries remain the leading economic partners, accounting for 20% of Vietnam's total import and export turnover. Vietnam's position has also been enhanced through proactively, actively, and responsibly contributing to the ASEAN.

During this period, Vietnam implemented many national interests in relations with ASEAN. The most significant national interests are ensuring economic development ensuring national security sovereignty.

3. Main findings

3.1. Achievements in ensuring national interests in Vietnam's relationship with ASEAN

The VCP's innovation of thinking and awareness creates the development steps in Vietnam's foreign policy with ASEAN within the international and domestic contexts. Former Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs of Vietnam also stated: "The decision to join ASEAN was a proper strategy of VCP, marking an important milestone in national integration. ASEAN is one of the first breakthroughs for Vietnam to implement the motto of multi-lateralization and diversification of foreign relations." This result is also achieved by grasping the right opportunity, forecasting the right trend, adjusting the right policies, and using the motto of

multi-lateralization, diversification, and appropriate implementation measures. Vietnam's foreign policy development with ASEAN has helped Vietnam realize the following national interests:

Firstly, the primary interest is that Vietnam has created ASEAN's security, peace, and stability: From 1986 to 2020, Vietnam experienced many difficulties, even being surrounded by politics and economic isolation. However, Vietnam has created a peaceful, secure, and stable environment for the country's development based on the right diplomatic strategy and the unanimous determination of the entire people. ASEAN has helped reinforce the basic international law principles in the region and created a vital security perimeter for Vietnam. Vietnam has promoted ASEAN's role to create a forum for dialogue and cooperation on political security that is important to the national interests, as in the South China Sea.

Being an ASEAN member also provides a valuable counterweight for Vietnam in building close links with ASEAN's major security partners on the diplomatic tool. ASEAN's principles, practices, and multilateral forums are the primary tools for Vietnam to have an integrated strategy to deal with Chinese pressures on the South China Sea. Strategic tools in ASEAN such as the principle of "non-intervention," TAC, and multilateral institutions, are the strategic measure for Vietnam to cope with the risk of "peaceful evolution" from other nations. Building trust and a cooperative environment within ASEAN, Vietnam has also gradually resolved existing or emerging bilateral issues with Southeast Asian countries, such as overlapping sea areas with Thailand, fishers illegally fishing (Indonesia); and migrant workers (Malaysia).

The year 2020 will recognize Vietnam's success as the 37th ASEAN Chair in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic raging around the world, including the ASEAN region. This is also the pivotal year in Vietnam's first term as Chairman of the ASEAN Working Group on Intellectual Property Cooperation (AWGIPC). With that responsibility, Vietnam has actively coordinated the activities of the AWGIPC Group to overcome difficulties and challenges caused by the COVID-19 pandemic to carry out ASEAN cooperation activities on intellectual property in accordance with the law in line with the set roadmap and goals, contributing to the overall success of the ASEAN Vietnam Year 2020.

Secondly, developing a country with regional resources is Vietnam's most common national interest. Joining ASEAN was one of the first steps of Vietnam in promoting industrialization and international economic integration. Ensuring economic development when participating in international organizations will help Vietnam maintain national interests in the economic and political fields. ASEAN helps Vietnam catch up with other countries in the region through economic cooperation within ASEAN. Vietnam's first import-export market and source of foreign direct investment is ASEAN. After 20 years of regional

integration, Vietnam's economic and trade relations with ASEAN have experienced remarkable development. ASEAN member countries are currently the second-largest supplier of goods to Vietnam (after China) and the third-largest export market of Vietnam (after the US and the European Union). The two-way trade turnover of Vietnam to ASEAN has increased by an average of 14.5% per year, from about 3.3 billion USD in 1995 to 42.1 billion USD in 2015 (up nearly 13 times). Vietnam's exports to ASEAN grew an average of 17.1%, from almost \$1 billion in 1995 to \$18.3 billion in 2015 (an increase of more than 18 times). ASEAN is also a primary FDI source for Vietnam and a bridge for many investments by multinational companies based in ASEAN. Vietnam's investment in ASEAN countries also tends to increase.

ASEAN also helps increase Vietnam's position internationally and creates favorable conditions for Vietnam to join regional and global organizations such as APEC and World Trade Organization (WTO). Vietnam's economy on the ASEAN platform has a more attractive position and attractiveness in FTA negotiations with significant partners such as Japan, Korea, the EU, Russia, India, the US, etc. Success from AFTA and FTAs ASEAN and its partners have helped Vietnam proactively and confidently participate in larger playing fields such as TPP and major FTAs with the EU, South Korea, and the Eurasian Economic Union. Thereby, Vietnam has expanded its market and attracted investment, modern technology, and management experience to ensure national interests.

Thirdly, enhancing Vietnam's role and position in the region and the world is also one of the other national interests. With ASEAN's growing role and capacity, ASEAN's partners have acknowledged this organization's central role in the regional structure. The big economic and political powers have continuously strengthened their cooperation with ASEAN through ASEAN's mechanisms. In March 2016, ASEAN had a strategic partnership with seven countries: China, Korea, Japan, USA, Australia, New Zealand, and India; to establish comprehensive alliances with Russia, the EU, and Canada. More and more countries and regional organizations worldwide have established and strengthened relations with ASEAN (84 countries have sent ambassadors to ASEAN up to 2015) (Kawai and Naknoi, 2015). ASEAN has laid a robust foundation that empowers Vietnam to amplify its position and influence on the international stage. Vietnam's pivotal role within ASEAN is widely recognized and highly regarded by significant partner countries, who perceive Vietnam as an indispensable factor in the formulation and execution of policies pertaining to Southeast Asia and the Asia-Pacific region. Through active engagement in multilateral cooperation mechanisms with ASEAN, Vietnam has expedited the convergence of its strategic interests with major influential nations in both the regional and global arenas. Furthermore, Vietnam has fortified its image, standing, and political clout on the

world stage by actively participating in regional affairs. Vietnam has garnered invaluable external support by becoming a member of APEC, joining the WTO, securing a non-permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council, and contributing to the United Nations Human Rights Council. In this vein, Vietnam has effectively advanced its national interests by virtue of its active involvement in ASEAN and its extensive international engagements (Vu, 2023)

Fourth, Vietnam also carries out activities to promote regional peace and solidarity to realize specific national interests. Vietnam has always maintained regional connectivity through ASEAN's fundamental principles and objectives. Vietnam has announced ASEAN's leading role in building, sharing, and promoting cooperation tools to create regional security frameworks, such as ARF, TAC, SEANFWZ, EAS, ADMM, ADMM+, etc. In the South China Sea - a complex issue related to the region's peace, security, and stability, Vietnam has created a positive, constructive, and responsible ASEAN approach in asserting. The countries' shared interests inside and outside the area ensure an environment of peace, stability, security, safety, and freedom of navigation and overflight in the South China Sea. Vietnam urged all concerned parties to seriously comply with international law, UNCLOS 1982, DOC, and the COC's early ratification. Vietnam also actively participates in ASEAN rule-building in areas previously seen as sensitive such as defense cooperation, democracy issues, human rights, etc. In addition to strengthening cooperation and intra-regional links, Vietnam has promoted collaboration between ASEAN and external partner countries, promoting an active bridging role in dialogue relations between ASEAN and many important partners, such as Japan, Russia, the USA, and Australia.

3.2. Challenges ahead

In addition to the benefits gained, Vietnam still has to overcome considerable challenges to maintain its national interests. These are differences in ASEAN member states' interests, values, lack of resources, pressure on capacity, etc.

3.2.1. There are differences in national interests among countries in the ASEAN region

Vietnam has difficulty promoting intimate interests, such as maintaining cohesion with ASEAN agreements on the South China Sea and Mekong; narrowing the development gap in ASEAN due to the diversity of institutions, history, development levels, cultures, practices, and languages among member countries,... Each nation has its different interests in cooperation matters. ASEAN countries also have various degrees of relations with powers outside the region, influencing Vietnam's interests, as happened at the 45th AMM in 2012 in Cambodia when the country did not reach a joint consensus statement on the South China Sea. The suspicion among some

Vietnam members sometimes still exists due to differences in political regime, development and economic structure, history, and culture. The relation strategies of each nation within ASEAN are different, especially in relations with foreign countries. There is still mutual competition in trade and investment attraction between Vietnam and many ASEAN countries; relations have been built wide, but not solid, and deep interdependence between members.

Moreover, the foreign policy of Vietnam is most deeply affected by changes in the region, especially in China-US - ASEAN relations. The increasing pressure from significant countries, especially China and the US, creates tremendous challenges for Vietnam. The US-China competition is dominated by central national nationalism and affected by political-ideological struggle, increasing the complexity and sensitivity of Vietnam's behavior towards the two powers. The geopolitical ambitions of the US and China also contradict the interests of small countries. China will use its traditional neighborly relations, ideological similarities, economic might, and military pressure to hold Vietnam back, expanding its influence more quickly into Southeast Asia. China's increased power to impose sovereignty over the South China Sea will threaten Vietnam's living space. Besides, the US has given up influencing the socialist direction of Vietnam. Also, excluding the US and China, other major countries for their interests can make tacit agreements, bargain with each other, and harm Vietnam's security and development.

3.2.2. Differences in values between the nations in ASEAN

ASEAN is also very diverse in ethnicity, culture, religious differences, and values. Vietnam must familiarize itself with and share regional and international importance and norms, especially on democracy, human rights, and the state's role in the economy and society. The difference in value makes the ASEAN member countries not have high trust, affecting ASEAN's consolidation of solidarity. Joining ASEAN integration, Vietnam must also change policies, amend domestic law, and accept other developed or developing countries' rules and regulations. The disparity in the level of development between Vietnam and the leading ASEAN-4 countries, between Vietnam and Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, etc., also made it challenging to implement the ASEAN goals. The political system difference between Vietnam and other member countries also makes countries not trust at a high level, especially in security cooperation.

3.2.3. Lack of resources

Resource constraints and economic disparities have hindered Vietnam from taking on a more active role in ASEAN. Vietnam's development level is still far from many ASEAN countries, especially countries

in the ASEAN-4 group. The lack of resources makes implementing Vietnam's responsibilities in ASEAN cooperation activities challenging. The integration capacity of Vietnam in complex infrastructure (transport, urban area), soft infrastructure (law, policy mechanism), knowledge infrastructure (education, training), etc., has many shortcomings.

Vietnam has not built a unified awareness of ASEAN's importance at all levels and sectors. It has not seen all opportunities and challenges without fully grasping the policy direction with ASEAN. Therefore, many implementation policies are ineffective, not taking advantage of economic, political, and security opportunities in relations with ASEAN, in intimate issues such as the South China Sea, Mekong River water resources, etc.

3.2.4. Capacity pressure

Economic links between ASEAN and other major economies will pressure Vietnam against accelerating integration. The complex, competitive environment between different linkages (EAS, APEC, ASEM, TPP, RCEP, FTAAP, etc.) also puts Vietnam ahead of many difficult choices. Also, Vietnam has not yet taken advantage of socio-political stability, an important geopolitical position, and abundant human resources. Community pillars do not play a role equally. The domestic infrastructure, human resources, and policy mechanisms have not kept pace with ASEAN Community building and integration requirements. Strategic research and forecasts related to ASEAN are still limited.

Many Vietnamese still think that Vietnam is a small country and Vietnam should keep the middle policy of "no first, no last" and "wait and see," which partly affects Vietnam's position and influence in ASEAN. This priority is that Vietnam should consider its foreign strategy in the next stage. Vietnam has come out of the socio-economic crisis and underdevelopment, becoming a middle-income developing country. Over the past 30 years, Vietnam's economy has achieved a much higher growth rate than in the pre-Doi Moi period. In 2015, the economy's scale reached about 204 billion USD, and per capita income reached nearly 2,300 USD compared to 471 USD in 2003. In 2020, Vietnam had successfully controlled the COVID-19 epidemic and became a rare economy that experienced positive growth during the pandemic. Vietnam has participated in value chains that play an increasingly important role in the global economy, such as food and food security, energy and energy security, textiles, footwear, etc.

The situation of the region and the world is posing new requirements and tasks. Vietnam needs more significant efforts and greater consensus on policy; develop mechanisms, procedures, measures, and resources to effectively implement policies with ASEAN and satisfactorily handle emerging complex issues to ensure the excellent implementation of national interests' goals.

4. Conclusion

The process of globalization has intensified interdependence among nations, and Vietnam has adhered to the principles of development while actively promoting its integration into the global arena. In essence, Vietnam has entered a phase of profound and all-encompassing international integration, a period marked by an array of opportunities and advantages interwoven with developmental challenges. Notably, the intricate dynamics of global relations exert a direct influence on Vietnam's interests and national security. Vietnam has diligently crafted a well-considered set of foreign policy directives to elevate its international relationships to a new echelon. The primary course of action for Vietnam revolves around regional and global integration, grounded firmly in the pursuit of national interests. National interests consistently occupy a central role in shaping Vietnam's foreign policy strategies and decisions, underpinning its approach to international affairs.

Compliance with ethical standards

Conflict of interest

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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