

General Secretary Nguyen Van Linh of the Communist Party of Vietnam and the Process of Adjusting Vietnam's Foreign Policy Towards Asean During The Period 1986-1991



MSc. Tran Van Thuyen

PhD. student at Ho Chi Minh City University of Social Sciences and Humanities.

ABSTRACT: From the 1980s, Vietnam gradually fell into an increasingly severe economic and social crisis. The urgent requirement for Vietnam at this time was to find a way to quickly overcome the crisis, stabilize the economic, political, and social situation, break the blockade and embargo imposed by the United States and Western countries, and open a period of integration and cooperation for development with the world. At the 6th National Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam in December 1986, Nguyen Van Linh was elected as General Secretary of the Party Central Committee, directly leading the country in implementing a comprehensive reform policy, including innovations in diplomatic activities. Within the scope of this article, the group of authors focuses on clarifying the process of adjusting Vietnam's foreign policy towards the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) during Nguyen Van Linh's term as General Secretary of the Communist Party of Vietnam from 1986 to 1991.

KEYWORDS: Nguyen Van Linh; ASEAN; Vietnam-ASEAN relations; Communist Party of Vietnam.

1. HISTORICAL CONTEXT

From the mid-1980s, major powers began to strongly adjust their strategies towards trends of détente and cooperation. By the end of 1989, the Soviet Union and the United States had ended the Cold War. The Soviet Union and China normalized their relations. Also beginning in 1989, severe economic, political, and social crises, resulting from mistakes in reform, led to the collapse and disintegration of the socialist regimes modeled after the Soviet Union in the Soviet Union itself and Eastern Europe. The bipolar world order was shattered. International relations gradually shifted from confrontation to dialogue. Peace, national independence, cooperation, and development became the major trends among countries worldwide. Additionally, the rapid advancements in science and technology had profound impacts and significant influence on many nations globally. The development of information technology increased human labor productivity. The process of globalization compelled countries to formulate appropriate development strategies.

The Asia-Pacific region also experienced significant changes: the United States withdrew its bases from the Philippines, and the Soviet Union withdrew from Asia. The end of the Cold War diminished ASEAN's role in the strategic dynamics of the major powers, placing ASEAN member states in a challenging position where they needed to quickly find a mechanism to ensure security, peace, and expand cooperation for joint development. The founding nations of ASEAN -Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand - recognized the need to steer Southeast Asia away from the consequences of the Cold War and promptly adjust ASEAN's foreign policy towards diversification and multilateralization in international relations, with a focus on cooperation, integration, and ensuring regional security.

In Vietnam, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the socialist countries in Eastern Europe had profound and comprehensive impacts on the economy, politics, security, and national defense. As a result, aid and trade agreements from the Soviet Union to Vietnam were drastically reduced. The centrally planned and bureaucratic subsidy-based economic model was no longer suitable, plunging Vietnam into a severe socio-economic crisis. "Economic growth was low, with some years experiencing negative growth. On average, during the 1977-1980 period, GDP grew by only 0.4% per year (with a decrease of 2% in 1979 and 1.4% in 1980). Per capita GDP declined (by 1.87% per year), reaching only 86 USD in 1986. Inflation persisted at a "galloping" rate, with the retail price index increasing by 774.7% in 1986. The living conditions of the population were extremely difficult. Vietnam was among the poorest countries in the world" (Economic Times).

Politically, the U.S. government intensified sanctions and exerted pressure on other countries regarding their relations with Vietnam. Vietnam had to maintain its armed forces due to tensions along the northern and southwestern borders. The

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unresolved issue of Cambodia obstructed the process of enhancing relations between Vietnam and the United States, China, and ASEAN.

The profound and sweeping changes in the international and regional situation placed Vietnam in a position where it urgently needed to alter its perspectives, strategies, and foreign policies to align with the new circumstances.

2. EXAMINATION OF VIETNAM'S FOREIGN POLICY TOWARDS ASEAN DURING THE PERIOD 1975-1985

During the period of U.S. military aggression and intervention in southern Vietnam, most Southeast Asian countries aligned with the U.S., either directly or indirectly participating in the war against Vietnam. Consequently, Vietnam maintained a cautious and reserved attitude towards ASEAN.

Following the reunification of the country in 1975, Vietnam began adjusting its relations with ASEAN. In January 1976, the Vietnamese Deputy Foreign Minister visited ASEAN member states, and in July 1976, the Vietnamese government announced a four-point policy towards Southeast Asian countries, which included: "(1) Respect for each other's independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity, non-aggression, non-interference in each other's internal affairs, equality, mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence; (2) Not allowing one's territory to be used by any foreign country as a base for aggression or interference in other regional countries; (3) Establishing friendly and good-neighborly relations, resolving disputes through negotiation; (4) Developing cooperation for the prosperity of each country based on its specific conditions, for national interests, peace, and genuine neutrality in Southeast Asia" (Nguyen Dinh Bin (Ed.), 2015, p. 299).

Immediately after announcing the four-point policy in 1976, Vietnam established diplomatic relations with Thailand (June 1976) and the Philippines (July 1976). Previously, Vietnam had established diplomatic relations with Indonesia (1964), Malaysia, and Singapore (1973). Thus, Vietnam had established diplomatic relations with all five founding ASEAN member states. To advance diplomatic relations with ASEAN countries, Vietnamese Foreign Minister Nguyen Duy Trinh and Prime Minister Pham Van Dong undertook high-level visits to Thailand and Malaysia in 1977, and to Indonesia and Singapore in 1978, with the aim of consolidating and developing friendly and cooperative relations with these countries.

However, starting in 1978, conflicts arose between Vietnam and Cambodia, leading ASEAN countries to adopt a confrontational stance against Vietnam. Vietnam's humanitarian actions were viewed by ASEAN countries as violations of national sovereignty, resulting in heightened tensions and a prolonged adversarial relationship that lasted over a decade.

In the process of seeking a solution to the "Cambodian issue," Vietnam proposed peace and cooperation in Southeast Asia, suggesting the signing of a non-aggression pact among Southeast Asian countries (January 1980). Thus, Vietnam chose to both confront ASEAN on the Cambodian issue and link its resolution to the establishment of a peaceful and stable region in Southeast Asia, promoting dialogue to reduce confrontation and divide the anti-Vietnam coalition.

On the ASEAN countries side, despite implementing a policy of embargo and isolation towards Vietnam, some member countries such as Indonesia and Malaysia continued dialogue with Vietnam. These countries adopted a more moderate stance towards Vietnam while seeking a political solution to the Cambodian issue. At the AMM Conference (February 1985), ASEAN countries agreed to appoint Indonesia as the representative to engage in dialogue with the Indochina countries.

It is evident that, in the context of being economically embargoed and politically isolated, Vietnam adopted appropriate policies in its relations with ASEAN countries. The aim was to improve the regional environment, enhance regional relations, ensure national security, and lay the groundwork for economic and trade cooperation with ASEAN member states. Additionally, Vietnam also took necessary measures that were both cooperative and conciliatory while being prepared to confront ASEAN to find a peaceful resolution to the Cambodian issue.

3. ADJUSTMENTS TO VIETNAM'S FOREIGN POLICY TOWARDS ASEAN DURING THE PERIOD 1986-1991

In December 1986, the 6th National Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam marked the beginning of a comprehensive reform process, initiating a new phase with significant changes in Vietnam's economic, political, and social life. Regarding foreign policy, the 6th Congress affirmed: "In the coming years, the task of our Party and State in the field of foreign affairs is to make every effort to combine the strength of the nation with the strength of the times" (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2005, p. 104).

The 6th Congress elected Nguyen Van Linh as General Secretary of the Communist Party of Vietnam. In his role as the highest leader of the Party, General Secretary Nguyen Van Linh, along with the Politburo, led Vietnam in implementing an independent, self-reliant, open, diversified, and multilateral foreign policy aimed at breaking the siege, embargo, and isolation. In this context, Vietnam promptly made appropriate adjustments in its foreign policy towards ASEAN.

A pivotal adjustment in Vietnam's foreign policy during this period was the preliminary adjustment outlined in Resolution 32 of the 5th Central Committee, July 1986. This resolution marked a shift in the Communist Party of Vietnam's approach to foreign policy during the reform and integration period. It set forth the task of Vietnamese foreign policy as combining national strength with the strength of the times and advocated a shift from confrontation to dialogue. Regarding

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Southeast Asian countries, Vietnam pursued the enhancement of peace, cooperation, and coexistence, aiming to establish Southeast Asia as a region of peace, stability, and cooperation. On the Cambodian issue, the resolution affirmed that "the solution to the Cambodian problem must ensure the preservation of the achievements of the Cambodian people's struggle, address the scourge of genocide, and create a peaceful and stable environment for each country on the Indochina Peninsula to rapidly develop economically..." (Nguyen Dinh Bin (Ed.), *Vietnamese Diplomacy 1945 – 2000*, 2015, p. 323).

Based on an analysis and evaluation of the global and international situation with a spirit of confronting the truth and accurately assessing reality, the 6th National Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam unanimously approved the comprehensive reform policy. In terms of foreign policy, the 6th Congress advocated for strengthening and expanding relations with all countries worldwide, regardless of political or social systems, implementing policies of friendship, cooperation, and peaceful coexistence to promote development, in line with the country's interests and global development trends. Regarding relations with ASEAN, the Communist Party of Vietnam proposed a policy of developing friendly and cooperative relations with Southeast Asian countries, expressing readiness to negotiate with regional countries to address issues in Southeast Asia: "We desire and are willing to negotiate with regional countries to resolve issues in Southeast Asia, establish peaceful coexistence, and build Southeast Asia into a region of peace, stability, and cooperation" (Communist Party of Vietnam, *Complete Party Documents*, 2007, p. 790).

Subsequently, on May 20, 1988, the Politburo issued Resolution No. 13/NQ-TW "On tasks and foreign policy in the new situation", which outlined directions for adjusting strategies and renewing foreign policy thinking. The resolution emphasized the importance of developing relations with neighboring countries, the region, and especially ASEAN. Reflecting on the significance of Resolution 13/NQ-TW, former Vietnamese Foreign Minister Nguyen Co Thach remarked: "Resolution 13 on foreign policy by the Politburo represents a strong renewal in thinking about global situations, in setting goals, and in redirecting our entire foreign policy strategy" (Nguyen Co Thach, 1989, p. 9).

In 1990, as the world situation rapidly changed and the socialist regimes in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe faced the risk of collapse, the Communist Party of Vietnam continued to adjust its foreign policy towards ASEAN. At the 8th Central Committee Meeting (6th Congress) in March 1990, it was established that national interests should be prioritized and that local, temporary, or secondary issues should not hinder the fulfillment of strategic tasks. The proactive steps taken during this period were driven by the priority of national interests in foreign policy planning. By the 7th Congress in 1991, the Communist Party of Vietnam further defined the tasks of foreign policy for the new era. Regarding relations with ASEAN countries, the Congress emphasized "maintaining peace, expanding friendly and cooperative relations, and creating favorable conditions for the construction of socialism and national defense, including "developing friendly relations with Southeast Asian countries and striving for a peaceful, friendly, and cooperative Southeast Asia" (Communist Party of Vietnam, *Complete Party Documents*, Vol. 51, 2007, p. 115).

The adjustments to Vietnam's foreign policy throughout the term of the 6th Congress reveal Vietnam's desire to establish a peaceful and stable environment to focus on economic development and address the severe aftermath of the war. Normalizing relations with neighboring countries and ASEAN was a strategic necessity. Consequently, during this period, Vietnam's foreign policy prioritized diplomatic measures aimed at transitioning from confrontation to normalization, peaceful coexistence, and cooperative development with China, the United States, and ASEAN countries. In its relations with ASEAN, Vietnam shifted from suspicion and confrontation to dialogue, seeking measures to improve relations with ASEAN and identifying ASEAN as a breakthrough point in international relations. This approach was intended to overcome political isolation and economic embargoes during the early years of Vietnam's reform process (1986-1991).

4. VIETNAM-ASEAN RELATIONS IN RESOLVING THE "CAMBODIAN ISSUE"

The Cambodian issue was the major obstacle in Vietnam-ASEAN relations. Therefore, Vietnam actively engaged with relevant parties to address this issue. In the process of resolving this problem, Vietnam recognized the crucial role of ASEAN countries in finding a political solution to the Cambodian issue, aiming for peaceful coexistence and stability among the countries in Southeast Asia.

On July 29, 1987, Indonesian Foreign Minister, representing ASEAN, made an official visit to Vietnam, marking the end of confrontation between Vietnam and ASEAN over the Cambodian issue. Following this, the two sides issued a joint statement on the matter. To expedite dialogue with ASEAN regarding the Cambodian issue, on October 11, 1987, the Vietnamese Ministry of Defense issued a joint announcement regarding the withdrawal of Vietnamese troops from Cambodia in November 1987. In light of the positive developments in resolving the Cambodian issue, ASEAN countries began to resume bilateral relations with Vietnam. Philippine President Corazon Aquino declared at the third ASEAN Summit in Manila that the Philippines "did not view Vietnam as a threat and would not oppose Vietnam's accession to ASEAN". Subsequently, meetings between representatives of ASEAN countries, Indochina countries, and Cambodian factions took place in Jakarta, Indonesia in July 1988; JIM-II in February 1989; and the International Conference on Cambodia IMC in February 1990 in Jakarta to negotiate a political solution to the

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Cambodian issue. The JIM-I conference, held in Bogor, Indonesia from July 25 to July 27, 1988, involved Vietnam, Laos, and ASEAN countries and aimed to find a comprehensive, correct, and long-term solution to the Cambodian problem. The conference achieved significant initial results, including the withdrawal of Vietnamese troops as part of a political solution and preventing the return of the Pol Pot genocide regime in Cambodia.

On April 5, 1989, Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia signed a joint statement regarding the complete withdrawal of Vietnamese volunteer troops from Cambodia. On May 20, 1988, the Vietnamese Politburo issued Resolution No. 13-NQ/TW, which identified three primary foreign policy priorities: withdrawing troops from Cambodia, normalizing relations with China, and improving and moving towards normalizing relations with the United States. Vietnam began the process of withdrawing its military from Cambodia. On May 26, 1988, the Vietnamese Ministry of Defense announced the withdrawal of 50,000 troops and the withdrawal of the Vietnamese Volunteer Army Command in Cambodia. Subsequently, on January 6, 1989, during the 10th anniversary celebration of the People's Republic of Kampuchea, when Cambodian forces had become sufficiently strong, General Secretary of the Communist Party of Vietnam, Nguyen Van Linh, declared that Vietnam would complete the withdrawal of its troops from Cambodia by September 1989, a year ahead of the original deadline, provided a political solution could be found. In line with this spirit, on September 26, 1989, Vietnam completed the withdrawal of its volunteer troops ahead of schedule. The early withdrawal of Vietnamese troops created momentum for accelerated dialogue with concerned parties, including ASEAN countries, which began to shift from supporting Democratic Kampuchea to engaging in dialogue with Vietnam.

From February 26 to March 1, 1990, the unofficial meeting on Cambodia (IMC) in Jakarta, Indonesia, included participants from Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, six ASEAN representatives, as well as representatives from France, Australia, and the United Nations Secretary-General. However, the conference could not issue a joint statement due to the Khmer Rouge's use of the veto power.

From June 25 to July 4, 1990, General Vo Nguyen Giap paid an official visit to Indonesia. By October 1990, Indonesian President Suharto made a return visit to Vietnam, becoming the first ASEAN leader to visit the country. These meetings between the two sides laid the groundwork for significant progress in the relations between Vietnam and Indonesia, as well as between Vietnam and ASEAN. Moreover, the success of President Suharto's visit marked a new phase of cooperation for the mutual benefit of both nations, fostering peace, cooperation, and development.

The rapid progress in resolving the Cambodian issue also contributed to the normalization of Vietnam-China relations, and simultaneously influenced U.S. policy in Indochina. The United States ended its support for the Tripartite Coalition Government of Cambodia and began making moves towards negotiations for the normalization of Vietnam-U.S. relations. Western countries and ASEAN bypassed the U.S. embargo and began establishing economic cooperation with Vietnam. The U.S. government encouraged the resolution of the Cambodian issue and supported ASEAN's dialogue with Vietnam. The U.S. played a key role in resolving the Cambodian issue through the P-5 mechanism. On July 18, 1990, U.S. Secretary of State James Baker announced that “the United States was withdrawing its support for the seat of the Tripartite Coalition Government of Cambodia at the United Nations, seeking to establish contact with the Phnom Penh government, condemning the Khmer Rouge, and advocating dialogue with Vietnam through the New York delegation, as well as implementing several humanitarian programs in Vietnam” (Nguyen Dinh Bin (Ed.), *Vietnamese Diplomacy 1945–2000*, 2015, p. 336).

On July 30, 1989, the Paris Conference on Cambodia was convened with the participation of 17 countries, including the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council, two Indochinese countries (Vietnam and Laos), six ASEAN countries, as well as Australia, Japan, India, and Canada. Additionally, four Cambodian factions (Hun Sen, Ranariddh, Khieu Samphan, Son Soubert) were also present, under the co-chairmanship of the French and Indonesian Foreign Ministers. The conference was also attended by the UN Secretary-General Javier Pérez de Cuéllar and the Chairman of the Non-Aligned Movement (the Foreign Minister of Zimbabwe). After more than six sessions from January to September 1990, a framework political solution for Cambodia was agreed upon, resulting in the signing of the Paris Peace Agreements on Cambodia on October 23, 1991. The main documents signed were: “(1) The Final Act of the Paris Conference on Cambodia; (2) The Agreement on a comprehensive political settlement of the Cambodia conflict, with annexes on the functions and tasks of the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC), military issues, elections, repatriation of Cambodian refugees and displaced persons, and principles for a new Cambodian constitution; (3) The Agreement concerning the sovereignty, independence, territorial integrity, and inviolability, neutrality, and national unity of Cambodia; (4) The Declaration on the rehabilitation and reconstruction of Cambodia” (Nguyen Dinh Bin (Ed.), *Vietnamese Diplomacy 1945–2000*, 2015, p. 339). These documents were a formalization of the “Framework document for a comprehensive political solution to the Cambodia conflict”, which had been approved by the five permanent members of the UN Security Council on August 28, 1990.

The signing of the Paris Peace Agreements on Cambodia officially ended the crisis surrounding the Cambodian issue, effectively resolving the tensions between Vietnam and those countries that had exploited the Cambodian issue to implement policies of isolation and sanctions against Vietnam, as well as conduct destabilizing activities that severely affected Vietnam's economic and social development. This opened a new era of cooperation and development. The relationships between Vietnam,

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Cambodia, and other countries involved in the Cambodian issue were resolved, creating numerous opportunities for cooperation and development under the new conditions. It also paved the way for the normalization of Vietnam's international relations.

The period from 1991 to 1992 marked significant progress in the relationship between Vietnam and ASEAN, characterized by dialogue and cooperation replacing tension and confrontation. In 1991, Vietnamese Prime Minister Vo Van Kiet made official visits to several ASEAN countries, including Malaysia (February 7, 1991), Indonesia, Thailand, and Singapore (from October 24 to November 1, 1991). Vietnam received strong support from ASEAN countries, which further accelerated the development of Vietnam-ASEAN relations, laying the groundwork and creating conditions for Vietnam to officially become the seventh member of ASEAN in July 1995.

CONCLUSION

In response to the rapid changes in the global and regional situation, General Secretary of the Communist Party of Vietnam, Nguyen Van Linh, directed the adjustment of Vietnam's foreign policy to promote and strengthen cooperative relations for peace, stability, and development in the region and the world. In this context, Vietnam has made appropriate policy adjustments to boost its relations with ASEAN, a move that holds strategic significance for Vietnam in terms of economy, politics, and security. Moreover, the adjustment of Vietnam's foreign policy towards ASEAN was a pressing need for Vietnam to promote regional relations, break through the blockade and embargo imposed from various sides, and serve Vietnam's strategic goal of promoting economic development through regional and global integration.

The joint resolution of the "Cambodian issue" by Vietnam and ASEAN has positively transformed the bilateral relationship, shifting from tension and confrontation to dialogue, contributing to regional security and stability, and reducing the risk of conflict in Southeast Asia. Furthermore, the resolution of the "Cambodian issue" demonstrates Vietnam's flexible and proactive foreign policy, emphasizing economic diplomacy, political diplomacy, and fostering friendships and cooperation, shifting from confrontation to dialogue under the leadership of the Communist Party of Vietnam, headed by the General Secretary Nguyen Van Linh, who directly guided and directed Vietnam's foreign policy during this period.

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