

VIETNAM AND ASEAN COMMUNITY: STRIVING TOWARDS A BRIGHTER FUTURE

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While the ASEAN Summit is going to take place in Vientiane on September it is time to take stock of how Vietnam-ASEAN relations have evolved over the years and how can the engagement be further intensified in a mutually beneficial manner. Not only has Vietnam benefited from its membership of the ASEAN but also it has contributed in equal measure, if not more, to the ASEAN as an organization and as a community that has become a very significant grouping in terms of political, economic, security and strategic considerations.

Last year Vietnam celebrated two decades of having joined the ASEAN. Over the years and despite many difficulties and impediments Vietnam has become more pro active and has made a whole range of noteworthy contributions towards achieving the goals and objectives of ASEAN. Hanoi has worked closely with the ASEAN members to realize the target of establishing the ASEAN Community by end December 2015. It has contributed greatly to implementing a wide variety programmes that were part of building the ASEAN Community in the 2009-2015 period and were aimed at bringing practical benefits to people, trade, businesses and growing regional economies.

Vietnam has completely identified with and supports the ASEAN Vision 2020 which describes ‘ASEAN as a concert of Southeast Asian nations, outward looking, living in peace, stability and

prosperity, bonded together in partnership in dynamic development and in a community of caring societies'. Vietnam has also supported the role of ASEAN in maintaining peace and security in the region, including peace, stability, security and safety in the East Sea/South China Sea. In the coming years Vietnam will further contribute to improving the operational effectiveness of ASEAN organizational system and strengthen the capacity of the ASEAN Secretariat. In addition Hanoi has stated its intent of working further to promote and deepen the bloc's relations with existing counterparts as well as establish diverse ties with new potential partners. In fact in an inter-ministerial meeting that took place in early January this year in Hanoi the ministries agreed to effectively implement the ASEAN Community Vision to 2025 and master plans to strengthen the pillars of politics-security, economics, and culture-society, particularly, initiatives on enhancing connectivity between member countries and narrowing development gaps.

Promoting economic integration, freer trade, services and investment; adhering to existing commitments as well as to new commitments to market opening is part of Vietnam's agenda besides enhancing participation in ASEAN's socio-cultural activities that contribute to social welfare. Disaster relief and climate change response would be some of the other diverse areas where mutual cooperation between Vietnam and ASEAN is being augmented.

Vietnam has also been promoting the central role of ASEAN to develop relations between ASEAN and its international partners. It has been nominated as country coordinator for strengthening the ASEAN-Indian relationship for the period 2015 to 2018. Earlier it was coordinator for ASEAN-EU relations for three years where its role has come in for a positive appreciation.

Strengthening solidarity, unity, and ASEAN's central role in maintaining peace, stability, security and cooperation in the region and in the emerging security architecture of the region in concert with other ASEAN members has been one of the main objectives of Vietnam's bilateral and multilateral efforts.

Vietnamese President Tran Dai Quang while delivering a lecture in Singapore in end August has emphasized the need for coherent and united ASEAN acting together to promote cooperation on the basis of international law, equality and mutual interest and especially so in *the face of the grave challenges facing the world today, such as the South China Sea dispute*. No one can disagree with

his statement that ‘might makes right’ mind set of some countries (alluding to China) worsens the disputes such as those over resources and territorial and maritime ones. It is evident that peaceful resolution of disputes in accordance with international norms and laws is crucial to avoid any hot conflicts.

In the upcoming ASEAN summit while its leaders would strive to present a unified stand on the South China Sea, China would do its utmost to prevent a consensus emerging among the ASEAN members as has been its norm in the past. Strengthening the centrality, unity and solidarity of ASEAN has always been a challenge especially when it comes to forging a united front on the question of the SCS issues. While ASEAN members especially those that are at the receiving end of China’s assertive policies would like China to deal with the SCS issue on multilateral basis China is more inclined to deal with it on bilateral basis. Cambodia in the past has been known to favour China.

Therefore, the other ASEAN leaders have to work hard on impressing the outlier members on the value and worth of forging unified approach in dealing with an aggressive and irredentist rising power whose uncertain behaviour and flouting of international norms would heighten the risks of unintended hot conflict.