


The Role of Malaysia in ASEAN

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The three important objectives of ASEAN, *a.* collaboration and cooperation; *b.* trade and economic growth; and *c.* peace and stability, have reflected in various initiatives and achievements by Malaysia.

Regional Governance

Throughout history, regional governance was based on nation-states working together for their mutual security and prosperity. Geographical proximity plays a key factoring such governance.

Although non-interference, respect for territorial integrity and Westphalian understandings of sovereignty have acted as regulatory norms for ASEAN members, this has not prevented the countries from conforming the founding principles of peace and security. The member-States have successfully promoted the interests of one another, by keeping conflicts amongst themselves as well as with other countries, aside. The organization has been able to maintain peace and stability within the region, without the eruption of war among its member-states. Moreover, it has provided a unique framework for regional community-building.

Malaysia even plays a crucial role in the Southeast Asia region and has taken several governance initiatives to maintain peace in the region. Most importantly, Malaysia initiated the idea of ZOPFAN (Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality) in the Foreign Ministers' Meeting (Kuala Lumpur, 1971). Under the ZOPFAN, the member-states agreed to exclude foreign powers, especially the United States, U.S.S.R and People's Republic of China from interfering with ASEAN countries and prevent them from using the region as a theatre for conflict.

Additionally, the Communications and Multimedia Minister Datuk Seri Dr Salleh Said Keruak from Malaysia also said, *"We are united in ASEAN to solving regional issues such as overlapping territorial claims, the threat of terrorism, cross-border crimes and others."*

Regional Cooperation

Regional cooperation and integration (RCI) is a process by which national economies become more interconnected regionally. It is an effective mechanism for member state countries, mostly from a specific geographical region, to place their common interests in concurrence with their national interests and facilitate mutual cooperation and dialogue.

In furtherance of promoting such cooperation, Malaysia invoked the idea of a regional free trade zone in 1990, the East Asia Economic Group (EAEG). The objectives of EAEG were to boost economic cooperation, to promote and defend free trade, accelerate economic growth, introduce open regionalisms, and contribute to multilateral trading systems. This was a debatable yet innovative move to protect the regional interests and enhance the trade between the countries.

When Malaysia became the Chairman in 2015, it declared "Our People, Our Community, Our Vision" as the theme, which further points out the active participation of Malaysia to bring the people of the community, rather than the country, closer to each other, economically as well as culturally.

Research shows that Malaysia also played a key role in progressively advancing the establishment of the ASEAN Charter, which is a document that confers the legal personality of ASEAN. With the entry into force of the ASEAN Charter, ASEAN will henceforth operate under a new legal framework and establish a number of new organs to boost its community-building process.

The inherent power of the member states to facilitate governance for multiple diverse groups in their country has allowed them to strengthen their decision making. In the Malay language, the term *muafakat* best captures this strength, which loosely translates to consensus and cooperation but more than that, it is often used in the context of decision-making within societal structures. When such countries form a group, cooperation through mutual dialogue is bound to have a strategic role in regional cooperation. As observed by the grouping's former Secretary-General, H.E. Ambassador Ong Keng Yong of Singapore, ASEAN continued to notch achievements after achievements based on the four "C's": community, Charter, connectivity and centrality.

Active participation in ASEAN is one way of not giving in to the sway of any one power. ASEAN's central nature over the years has ensured that it plays a crucial "manager" role in terms of dealing with competing influences in the region.

Another factor adding to the cooperation is the mention of "ASEAN Centrality" in several documents like the Charter. Centrality *within* ASEAN is defined as the proximity of the ties between ASEAN member states, intra-ASEAN coherence leading to centrality by way of enabling the organization to "*gain access to resources, set the agenda, frame debates, and craft policies that benefit its member states.*"

The principles of centrality also facilitated mutual dialogue between the states to tackle the COVID 19 issue. Joint statements and special summits were organized to establish collaboration between the states.

ASEAN like all previous regional efforts at community building before it will be expected to show to the world and its people, that it is a viable grouping that could face up to the challenges of consolidating political, security, economic and socio-cultural strengths for the benefit of not only its peoples but more importantly the community of nations outside the region and the world.

Humanitarian Assistance

Cooperation and assistance in humanitarian crisis and emergency is a feature which demarcates diplomacy from genuineness. Along with other member states, Malaysia has played a crucial role through financial and human resources in cases of emergencies. These included providing assistance to Indonesia, Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia and the Philippines which were affected by natural disasters like in Aceh (tsunami) and Yogyakarta (earthquake), as well as being the intermediary for peace talks between the Philippine government and the MILF (Moro Islamic Liberation Front).

Malaysia has been regarded as the most vocal country in criticizing and commenting on the issues surrounding the Myanmar-Rohingya crisis and plays a critical role in facilitating humanitarian assistance, both on its own and jointly with other ASEAN countries.

An active stand in such cases lays down the foundation for cooperation between countries. To truly honour the commitments for mutual security, a step in the right direction for human rights plays a key role. Assistance solely based on economic benefits may be beneficial in the short term, but such an alliance shall not survive in the long run.

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Southeast Asia

Vietnamese President Vo Van Thuong's visit to Laos



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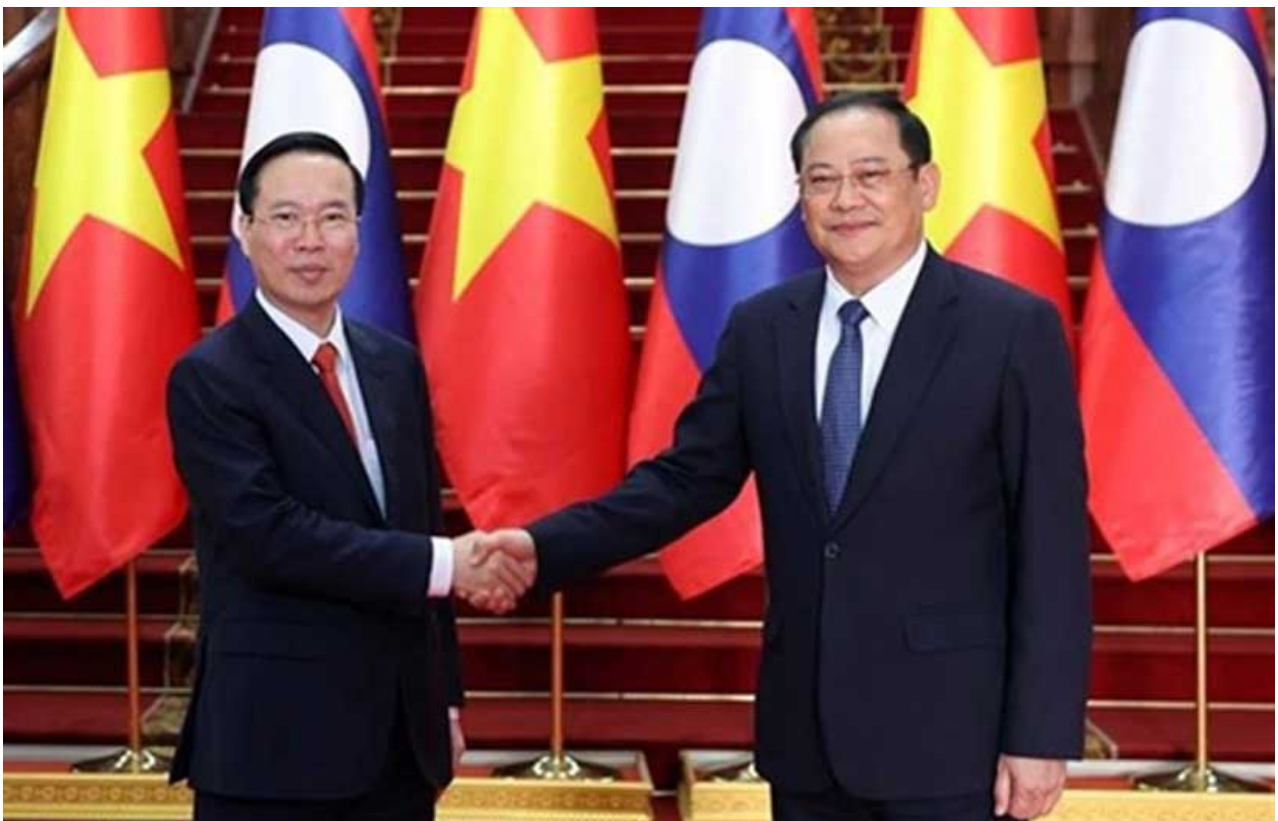
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Prof. Pankaj Jha



President Vo Van Thuong (L) and Lao Prime Minister Sonexay Siphandone__Photo: VNA
Vietnamese president Vo Van Thuong visited Laos as its first country of destination after his nomination as the new president of Vietnam. Given the fact that the two countries have ideological and party relationships, it has become important for Vietnam to engage Laos as the country is facing challenges with regard to debt servicing and management of infrastructure projects. As per the economic data the annual trade between Vietnam and Laos last year was nearly US \$1.7 billion. Vietnam president's visit is primarily to look into intensifying ties between the two countries in areas such as agricultural products, food production, consumer goods , and also look for better avenues in border trade cooperation between the two sides.

The two countries have also been working on joint development in sectors such as energy and mining industries. Vietnam has also proposed Vietnam -Laos railway project to boost trade and connectivity between the two countries. As it is well known that Laos is a landlocked country this rail route will connect the port city of Vung Ang with Vientiane ,thereby helping Laos to explore larger markets in East Asia. The proposed project which is likely to be nearly 555 kilometre long will be costing US \$5 billion and this will also help in integrating Laos with other markets across South East Asia. This rail link will also connect to the China – Laos railway line and help in better access to north Laos products to reach markets across the world.

Vietnam has been one of the major investors in Laos and has invested more than US \$4.3 billion in projects related to trade, transportation, energy, power generation and other sectors. Vietnam has given 50 year concessionary loan to Laos in development of this railway project as well as its investment in deep sea port of Vung Ang. With Vietnam signing the free trade agreement with European Union last year, it has also been exploring freight train service to Europe and the pilot project was started in July 2021 when the first container containing cargo from Hanoi reached Belgium in August 2021. Interesting aspect is that Laos is one of the primary destination countries for Vietnamese investment. The Vietnamese businesses and enterprises have already contributed U.S. dollar 200 million as taxes and other obligations to Laotian economy. In terms of trade profile Laos exports wood and wood products, fertilizers, rubber and corn to Vietnam.

In this context the visit of Vietnamese president to Laos on the invitation of the general secretary of the Laos People's Revolutionary Party is significant because Vietnam has been according highest priority to the country given its comprehensive cooperation and ideological solidarity with Laos. With the building of new dams and the excessive burden of external debt from China, it has become pertinent for Laos to look for other avenues of economic cooperation with its neighbouring countries. The inflation in Laos has increased to nearly 42 per cent because of increasing energy and commodity prices. Furthermore, the cooperation between the two countries is important for laying the foundation of ASEAN community particularly the three pillars related to political security community , economic community and social- cultural community. Vietnam has been looking for consultations with Laos on managing the water flow along the Mekong as well

as development of the greater Mekong subregion. The two countries are also looking for enhancing tourism cooperation as well as cooperation in areas such as training, human resource management and vocational capability building among the workers in Laos.

Vietnam has been looking for enhancing capacities within Laos, and is willing to act as a regional value chain leader given the fact that Vietnam manufacturing has been making great strides . The two day visit of Vietnamese president has deepened the friendship, and solidarity between the two countries. Laos has been looking towards Vietnam for the purposes of upgrading its economic operation and looking for joint projects particularly in the field of technology and scientific innovation, education and sports. Vietnam has preparing for 4 IR and has been asking the other Southeast Asian countries in terms of making progress related to 4th industrial revolution and work together for larger socio economic development in far flung areas of mainland Southeast Asia which has been untouched by the larger geopolitical and economic changes.

Vietnamese president engaged in a series of meetings with top leadership of Laos and the two sides agreed on working together in different fields so as to strengthen collaboration and implement the agreements which have been signed in the last few years given the fact that the two countries have a long historical relations and is critical for development of the region. During the visit Vietnamese president also offered a gift of 1 million U.S. dollars for the Laotian counterparts. There has been signing of the MOU on cooperation in technology and innovation as well as another agreement related to cooperation in science between the two sides. The regular engagement of Laotian leadership by the Vietnam's top leadership clearly showcases Vietnam as a critical stakeholder in the development of the Mekong region. With the stress on developing better understanding on issues related to conflict resolution, sustainable development and achieving UN sustainable development goals along with helping Laos to manage climate change, food crisis, water security and work towards similar policy approach at regional level ,particularly in Southeast Asia and the larger Asia Pacific region,Vietnam is keen to be a trusted neighbour.

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Southeast Asia

Vietnam's role in Mekong Regional Cooperation



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Mekong region is called the rice bowl of Asia and Mekong river is its lifeline.. Many countries have been interested in developing this region, and it is also critical for the riverine communities which are dependent on Mekong river for their livelihood. Countries such as Vietnam and Thailand have been working to bring about consensus among Mekong countries and also involve ASEAN dialogue partners in the development of this region. Vietnam has been instrumental in raising the issue of sustainable development and addressing climate change challenges in this region. Many sub regional organisations such as Mekong Ganga cooperation, Greater Mekong subregion have all been created to develop this region through economic operation, development of infrastructure, and also promote tourism in this region.

The United states have also contributed through the comprehensive plan under the Mekong-US Partnership. It has been undertaking initiatives for promoting autonomy, good governance, and sustainable growth of Mekong countries which will contribute to the strengthening of the economic structures and political stability across the ASEAN region. Under this initiative which is also known as Lower Mekong Initiative the USAID has provided more than US \$3.5 billion aid and assistance for Mekong partner countries under which budgetary allocations have been made under different heads such as health programs, economic growth, peace and security, human rights and governance, education and social services as well as humanitarian assistance.

This initiative is for the lower Mekong region, and is primarily for improving economic connectivity, human resource development, management of transboundary water and natural resources, energy security and building consensus on non traditional security issues within the mainland Southeast Asia. In fact right since 2020 when Vietnam was the

chairman of ASEAN, there has been stress on addressing emerging threats such as health security, working on capacity building, and countering transnational crime, addressing challenges such as human trafficking and drugs trade. One of the major reasons for this Mekong US partnership is primarily to sync with ASEAN outlook on the Indo Pacific and US Indo Pacific strategy. This partnership synchronises itself with ASEAN objectives, along with Mekong River Commission(MRC), as well as building complementarities with other institutions.

One of the major achievements under this partnership has been allocation of \$52 million on emergency health and humanitarian services so that the countries in the Mekong region can combat COVID-19 in future. Further, there is a sisters river exchange program which has been for providing best practices between the Mekong River Commission and the Mississippi River Commission related to dam safety, humanitarian assistance, disaster response, and better comprehensive planning.

In fact one of the initiatives which have been undertaken by Vietnam has been related to developing better understanding among the Mekong countries and engaging the developmental partners including United States, China, Japan, India, and the European Union. Vietnam has also been instrumental under the promotion of next generation leaders initiative with the support of United States. Right since the institutionalising of Mekong River Commission in 1995, there has been efforts for addressing critical vulnerabilities that countries like Vietnam face as the downstream riparian countries. As it is well known Mekong river provides millions of Vietnamese with food, livelihood and fisheries, therefore any changes in water flow or extensive silting on dams would impact the river flow and the aquatic species which are very unique to Mekong ecosystem.

Mekong river supports more than 18 million people and the agricultural produce from this region accounts for nearly 1/3 of the Vietnam's economy. Vietnam slowly is emerging as a middle power and has been interacting with its neighbouring countries and has been promoting its interest while at the same time raising issues with upstream countries such as China on extensive dam construction and the unsustainable hydro power generation. It has also been seen that the construction of dams have impacted the migration of the fisheries and reduced the nutritious supplements required for better yield of rice varieties. The changes in the river flow pattern creates challenges related to climate change, extreme weather conditions, and unsustainable rice cultivation because of paucity of water. Therefore, Vietnam has always raised the issue of resource management particularly in the context of aquatic species and ecological balance in and around the Mekong river delta.

During the current Mekong river Commission meeting held in first week of April in Laos, Vietnam has been vocal with regard to development of the trilateral area between Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia as well as looking for new avenues under the greater Mekong subregional cooperation. Special attention need to be given with regard to information and data sharing, water flow governance, and undertaking serious studies related to flood and drought management. Under the Mekong- Lancang Cooperation mechanism there is need to address environmental changes related to extensive human

activities and exploitation of riverine resources. Vietnam is comfortably poised because of its better relationship with Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia and has been engaging developmental partners as well. Further, Vietnam has been promoting the renewable and alternate energy sources by stressing on solar and wind power generation capacities within mainland Southeast Asia.

Under the 4th Mekong river Commission summit the stress was on exploring innovation and cooperation for building sustainable Mekong region. For a country like Vietnam where more than 3/5 of Vietnam's water resources are from transboundary rivers, it has always stressed on more nature based approach and building understanding on programs and projects related to the river and its catchment area.

In the recent meeting of MRC, Vietnam deputy minister of natural resources and environment Le Cong Thanh stressed on the needs for undertaking practical measures while protecting legitimate rights and interest of riverine communities. He also stated that the judicious use of water should be related to both mainstream river and the tributaries of Mekong river. He talked about data centre for knowledge and consultations among the stakeholders on a timely basis. He stressed on the need for activation of the larger agenda of Mekong river Commission and China should also affirm its commitment to the working of the MRC. Vietnam has always acknowledged that Mekong is the only lifeline for communities living on the river and there must be sustainable development of the region without undermining ecological concerns .

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Southeast Asia

Beyond the Myth of Bebas-Aktif, An Argument for Indonesia Partiality in Conflicts



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The recent Russo-Ukrainian conflict that broke out after the latter's invasion of the former's territory in 2022 sparked a controversy among Indonesians about the foundation of their country's foreign policy and its relevance to today's world.

Radityo Dharmaputra, lecturer in Universitas Airlangga, criticizes Indonesia's half-hearted attitude toward the ongoing conflict in Ukraine where the foreign ministry was only committed to vote in favour of condemning the Russian invasion and annexation of the other party. He argued that Indonesia's principle of "bebas-aktif" or "independent and active" in formulating and enacting foreign policy directives has contributed to the ambiguity of the government's position on the issue of the Ukrainian conflict.

Should Indonesia be Neutral?

"Bebas-aktif" policy is rooted on Mohammad Hatta's "Paddling Between Two Rocks" speech in 1948, where he emphasized the need for Indonesia to steer clear between the US-led Western bloc and the USSR-led communist bloc in the emerging Cold War.

Hatta argued that Indonesia should be free to act in accordance to its national interest and *raison d'être* as inscribed on the Constitution, which is the strengthening of peace and international solidarity. A set of goals which could not be achieved if Indonesia, on the contrary, takes part in one of the Cold War blocs as yet another belligerent party.

If understood at a glance, the "independent and active" policy could be misinterpreted as the need to be apathic towards the global situation, especially towards conflicts. Hatta himself, had foreseen this problem by stating that Indonesia cannot be

neutral in conflicts under the pretext of “independent and active policy.”

The stance of “bebas-aktif” is intrinsically reinforced by Indonesia’s membership in the UN, in which as a member state, Indonesia must comply with Articles 41 and 43 of the U.N. Charter which state the obligation of members to “...contribute to the maintenance of international peace and security...” in other words, Indonesia should oppose any parties that violates world peace by merit of their actions.

Such misinterpretation of “independent and active” policy could lead to ambivalence in reacting to a clear violation of international law and peace by any party. This mindset of ambivalence is reflected on the Indonesian intelligentsia during the start of Russo-Ukrainian conflict in 2022, in which Universitas Hasanuddin lecturer Patrice Lumumba and military analyst Connie Rahakundini Bakrie criticized Indonesia’s support for the UN General Assembly’s resolution condemning Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.

Among the rank of academicians, Universitas Indonesia Professor in International Law Hikmahanto Juwana deplored the same vote for not considering the impact on Indonesia-Russia relation, in which the latter could perceive former’s stance as orbiting the United States.

Those comments were made by primarily considering world peace in the context of great power politics between the United States and Russia, not forgetting their respective allies like the People’s Republic of China. As seen before, Hikmahanto did not even emphasize Ukraine’s concern for safeguarding its sovereignty, he went straight to the issue of Russia’s attitude towards Indonesian response in the UN.

Similar attitude was also shown by Professor of International Relation in Universitas Indonesia Evi Fitriani, who said that Russia’s invasion could also be attributed to unspecified decisions by the Ukrainian government. She blamed the Government of Ukraine, and the West for providing a reason for Russia to invade. Again, Ukraine’s status as being the main victim of the war does not give it the privilege of being treated as the main actor as well.

Unlike the obvious contradiction of having a neutral stance to the “independent and active” policy, the matter of world peace as a goal of said policy is a far more complex issue to deliberate. One that will be greatly assisted by paying attention to the result of Afro-Asian Conference also known as Bandung Conference in 1955. A phenomenal event in the history of international relations that embodies the “independent and active” policy.

Remembering Bandung Conference

The “*Dasasila Bandung*” or “Ten Principles of Bandung” that came from Bandung Conference provides a clear elaboration on the “independent and active” policy and how it should guide Indonesia’s, along with other newly independent states in acting on world

stage. It is to these principles that Indonesia should wisely consider the soundness of its stance and decision regarding to ongoing conflicts, particularly to the current Russo-Ukrainian conflict.

Of the ten principles agreed at Bandung Conference, two of them directly correlated with the violation of Ukrainian sovereignty during ongoing Russian aggression, which started in fact by the invasion and annexation of Crimea in 2014. Those principles are “respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all nations” and “respect for the right of each nation to defend itself singly or collectively, in conformity with the Charter of the United Nations.”

This set of principles emanates from the genuine concerns of Bandung Conference for securing and protecting the political independence of nations. One that should be satisfied by the uncritical acceptance of state sovereignty. It was a normative commitment to be in support of a state’s sovereignty as part of a wider project of international solidarity, which aimed to erase colonialism and imperialism then and now.

With this clarity of “independent and active” policy as developed in the “Ten Principles of Bandung,” Indonesia should foremost view Ukraine as a brother in the struggle for state sovereignty against their transgressor’s colonialist and imperialist project. Then, if partiality is at question, Indonesia must show its solidarity with Ukraine. In addition, Ukraine’s claim to its contested territory has its basis in international law which Hatta esteemed in his elaboration of “independent and active” policy.

It is clear that neutrality goes against Indonesia “independent and active” policy; on the contrary, it mandates Indonesia to independently play an active role in world stage, particularly in strengthening world peace and international solidarity. However, it does not prioritize world peace above the struggle of a state for its sovereignty based on international law. It is imperative for Indonesia to show its partiality on that issue, which is to Ukraine in our case. Finally, Indonesia’s consistence or inconsistency in upholding the “Ten Principles of Bandung” as a guide for its “independent and active” policy that is based on international solidarity among states which is struggling will set a precedence. A precedence for Indonesia itself and other countries’ perceptions of Indonesia’s foreign policy. It is very important for Indonesia to be partial when it comes to the defence of any state’s sovereignty, especially in this time of conflict.

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