

MEKONG CONNECT

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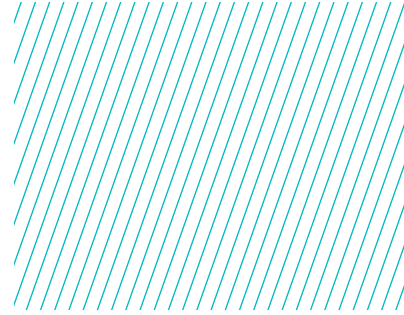
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EDITORIAL FOREWORD

Welcome to the June 2022 Issue of the Mekong Connect Magazine, a joint publication between the Asian Vision Institute (AVI) and the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS) Cambodia Office. The magazine publishes two Issues per year, which are funded by the KAS Cambodia Office, to provide access to readers wishing to gain a better understanding of a wide range of issues in the Mekong region, including climate change, trade, food security, poverty, sustainable development, COVID-19, peace and security, foreign policy, and international cooperation. The magazine's digital version is available for free download on AVI and KAS Cambodia websites.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the February 2021 military coup in Myanmar, and the war in Ukraine, peace in the region was not perhaps an urgent topic to be discussed. However, the pandemic, the coup, and the war, coupling with the intensifying great powers' rivalries in the region, have put increasing pressure on regional peace. Therefore, this June 2022 Issue put together six analytical articles focusing on the theme of peace and conflict resolution in the Mekong region to provide insights into the factors, actors, and contexts that have caused conflicts, as well as the efforts by different stakeholders, institutions, countries, and ASEAN in protecting and promoting regional peace.

Since the Myanmar political crisis is a great challenge affecting not only the Myanmar people but also ASEAN, the first three articles in this Issue focused on providing perspectives about peace and conflicts in the country. The first article provided insights into the roles of a Japanese organisation, The Nippon Foundation, and its Chairman, Yoshie Sasakawa, as a broker in the peacebuilding process in Myanmar before the military coup. The second article by a Myanmar scholar focused on the negative impacts of the military coup on peace and democracy and the resistance from the public and ethnic groups. The coup has caused major reconfigurations in Myanmar's politics, whose future trajectory is hard to predict. The third article explained how the Myanmar political crisis has posed a great challenge for ASEAN and how ASEAN, particularly Cambodia as the 2022 Chair of the regional organisation, is trying to help restore peace and democracy in Myanmar.

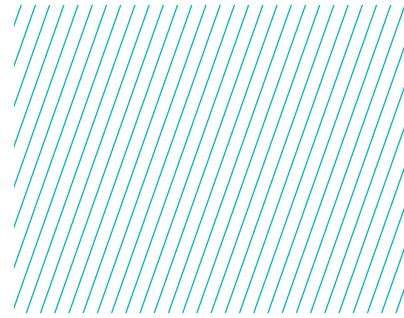
The last three articles discuss peace and conflicts in the other three Mekong countries. The article about Thailand illustrated the complexities of the separatist conflict in Thailand's southern provinces and provided some useful policy recommendations for the peace dialogue there. The article about Cambodia provided a perspective about how the country has successfully ended a three-decade-long civil war and built a durable peace, which has until now lasted for more than 20 years, which is extraordinary for a country emerging from the ashes of war and genocide. The last article explains how Vietnam has transformed itself from a war-torn, isolated country into an active member of ASEAN, working to promote regional and international peace.

The challenges to regional peace and security have increased and become more complex. The authors have provided insights into the issues and some practical policy recommendations. In addition to the policy suggestions offered in this Issue, we encourage more robust debates and further studies to be conducted to provide more enriched analysis.

We would like to acknowledge the intellectual contributions and appreciate the authors' efforts. Our special thanks also go to KAS Cambodia's team, namely Dr Daniel Schmücking and Ms Nuon Monika. We also wish to thank AVI President Dr Chheang Vannarith and the AVI Secretariate team for their support and assistance.

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Volume 4, Issue 1



Peace and Conflict Resolution in the Mekong Region

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The Sasakawa Way to Peacebuilding in Myanmar: Sustained Incremental Trust Establishment and Support (SITES)

*Desmond Molloy**

Introduction

In the aftermath of typhoon Nargis in 2008, the totalitarian military regime of Myanmar grudgingly opened its door to international assistance in addressing the subsequent humanitarian disaster. Highly suspicious of foreigners, particularly westerners and their ideas of liberal democracy, the regime remained concerned about the impact of infiltration of its domain. In weighing the positive impact of international assistance and balancing growing Chinese influence, the Myanmar regime considered its continued closed totalitarianism as untenable or no longer in its interests. Courting international support and acceptance while protecting its critical interests with the ratification of the 2008 Constitution, the regime initiated from 2011 a limited opening and ‘civilianisation’ of the system through the establishment of the process of implementing a ‘disciplined democracy’.

As the ‘opening’ progressed, bilateral, multilateral, and non-governmental humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding support rushed into Myanmar from around the globe. Early in the process, the regime, non-state stakeholders, and beneficiary communities demonstrated cultural and value-based resistance to applying western development theory in the provision of support. This article illustrates how one Japanese philanthropic organisation, The Nippon Foundation, and its Chairman, Yohei Sasakawa, double-hatted as the Special Envoy of Japan for Reconciliation in Myanmar, sought to apply a hybrid Asian approach to assistance that would overcome this cultural and value-based resistance.

Western Development Theory v. The ASEAN/Asian Way

Western Development Theory is the sum of a complex collection of approaches governed within the parameters of agreed principles trashed out at global conferences and articulated in co-signed documents with soundbite titles, such as The New Deal (International Dialogue 2011), Sustainable Development Goals (UN 2015), Principles for Fragile States (OECD 2007), and Sustaining Peace (UN 2018).

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In contrast, the East does not claim a development theory. It has several approaches: China's infrastructure-focused Belt and Road Initiative, Taiwan's more human-focused New Southbound Policy, and the ASEAN Way (Masilamani and Petersen 2014). Japan tends to take a pragmatic, case-by-case approach towards development assistance, adapted to reflect its unique relationship with the relevant host countries.

Yoshie Sasakawa, The Nippon Foundation, and Myanmar

The Nippon Foundation (TNF), led by its Chairman, Yohei Sasakawa, has had a long relationship with Myanmar since 1976, starting with support for eradicating leprosy. Since 2002, its programmes in Myanmar have expanded into development and humanitarian areas with support for people with disabilities, educational capacity and school-building, agricultural capacity building, and discrete projects such as the support to Dr. Cynthia Maung's famous Mae Tao Clinic serving Myanmar refugees in Mai Sot, a sustainable generic medical-box project for remote rural villages, and support to remote frontier areas near the Thai border through part-funding 'the Back-pack Medics Program.'

In 2012, as Myanmar altered its direction from totalitarian military dictatorship to euphemistically termed 'disciplined democracy', Sasakawa was approached by President Thein Sein of the Transitional Government who requested him to act at a personal level in encouraging the anti-government ethnic armed organisations (EAOs) in peripheral states to engage in the newly launched Myanmar Peace Process, which was to be established initially to achieve a Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA). Concurrently, Sasakawa was appointed as the Special Envoy of the Government of Japan for the National Reconciliation of Myanmar.



Source: *Mid-Term Review of ASEAN Economic Community Blueprint 2025*

In late 2012, TNF opened and staffed the Myanmar Liaison Office in Yangon to enhance its capacity to implement its ongoing development and humanitarian projects and support Sasakawa's new mission, the implementation of its peacebuilding programmes in support of the Myanmar Peace Process.

The Sasakawa Way to Peacebuilding

Sasakawa and TNF were conscious of historical local resistance to the application of Western Development Theory (KSPN 2014; KIC 2014; MPSI 2014; Wells 2019) honoured more in theory than in practice and was often perceived as pressured by constrained timeframes and donors' need for political 'wins' while focusing on a western perspective of accountability. In contrast, Sasakawa and TNF strove for a more culturally and conflict-sensitive approach to the complex environment in Myanmar, drawing on Japan's historical relationship and adopting a more pragmatic 'Asian style' while listening carefully to the well-informed local advice from both the Myanmar Peace Commission (MPC), a government-appointed commission created to direct the peace process, and the leadership of the various EAOs.

This approach involved quiet development of trust through personal relations across the political spectrum, including with the President; Aung San Suu Kyi, leader of the National League for Democracy; General Min Aung Hlaing, Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces (Tatmadaw); Minister Aung Min of the MPC; and the EAOs. This combined light-footprint, non-instructive advocacy where entry-points would arise as a low-profile intermediary in a system approach to conflict sensitivity between the most crucial parties to the peace process (Woodrow and Chigas 2011). Ten of the Twenty EAOs had signed the NCA by 2015 (TAF 2017). In supporting the NCA, TNF expected to contribute to an eventual Comprehensive Peace Accord in the context of increasing democratisation through agreed federal solutions.

In 2012, Sasakawa met the principals of the EAOs in Chaing Mai and immediately started to develop the required trust. Initially, he offered logistical and material support to dialogue in carefully encouraging meetings between the government peace negotiators, the MPC, and the EAO principals. He even brought the relevant ethnic leaders to visit Japan, where, to the consternation of the Government of Myanmar, they met Prime Minister Shinzo Abe.

Sasakawa focused on the main elements of common ground, gently pushing forward rather than dwelling on obstacles. This approach constituted a back-channel role in conflict management. Conflict in Myanmar is complex and non-binary, with many actors with different perspectives and mistrust consolidated over decades. He would not be involved directly in negotiations but would act as a discreet intermediary, recognising an exclusively nationally owned peace process.

Such an approach represented conflict management rather than peacebuilding. He brought together the strong financial and implementational capacity of TNF with the legitimacy and good offices of Special Envoy for Japan.

Sustained, Incremental, Trust Establishment and Support (SITES)

For peacebuilding support, in consultation with the EAO leadership, he offered demand-driven food and non-food humanitarian assistance to conflict-affected communities from 2013 to 2015. TNF initially funded this. And then, with more than \$100 million over five years, made available by the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the assistance evolved into larger-scale local infrastructural support, houses, schools, clinics, roads, and bridges from 2015 to 2021.

The primary working principle, developed in consultation with all parties, consisted of the “Four Green Light Rule”. TNF must have the approval of the leadership of the EAOs, the state government, the Union government, and the Tatmadaw for all of its activities. Needs and target communities were agreed between the EAOs and state governments, which would then offer a mutually agreed request to TNF.

When a breakdown in discussions appeared imminent, Sasakawa offered himself as a safety guarantor to persuade the EAOs not to leave the table. In pursuing his commitment to this task, combining concurrent 2nd and 3rd track diplomacy utilising informal ‘back-channel’ contacts, Yohei Sasakawa travelled to meetings with Government principals, MPC, and ethnic armed leadership either in the Myanmar frontiers or in Thailand, altogether one hundred and seven times between 2012 and mid-January 2020. Sasakawa believes, “Undoing the tangled threads requires repeated dialogue and patience. While this seems like a long route, it is the shortest.”

TNF team coined a term to describe Sasakawa’s hybrid and innovative approach to conflict management/peacebuilding as “Sustained Incremental Trust Establishment and Support” (SITES). SITES reflects consistent, flexible, and agile mechanisms of funding and implementation with ‘light foot-print foreign presence’ and non-intrusive dynamic monitoring, evaluation, and adjustment methods designed and tested based on trust between principals and respect developed through kindred respectful relations, reflecting integrity, access to resources and the capacity to deliver. It involves personal contact and affability. It reflects both responsiveness to requests and proactivity in anticipating needs. This respectfulness is purposefully permeated from Yohei Sasakawa down through the staff members of TNF, becoming a mainstream approach. Trust, respect, and patience are demonstrated through the design of consistent policy for decision-making, simple functional mechanisms of funding, and implementation that minimise bureaucracy while optimising cash and resource flows.

This approach required consistency in implementation and clear lines of communication, careful and thoughtful consultation, and patience in moving forward in small palatable steps.

Conclusion

Sasakawa's SITES approach to conflict management in Myanmar was intent on encouraging dialogue between parties rather than directly on peacebuilding interventions. Concurrently and in concert, TNF moved deftly into the realm of peacebuilding with conflict and culturally sensitive awareness, with the guidance of MPC and in close consultation with parties to the peace process. They operationalised Sasakawa's philosophy with this context-specific approach applying SITES, prioritising practical and pragmatic implementation over global theory.

This approach engaged state governments in dialogue with the EAOs through jointly implementing programmes to address the needs of conflict-affected communities. It encouraged bottom-up advocacy for the peace process by demonstrating the peace dividend. The result was a programme that achieved the delivery of its expected outputs and contributed to the desired mid-term outcomes. While difficult to measure quantitatively and to attribute causality, from a qualitative perspective, it contributed to a movement towards the desired outcomes. SITES in Myanmar was context-specific, focusing on the mindset of attuned conflict and cultural sensitivity, respect, and the focus on developing trust through personal relationships amongst principals, with non-intrusive, steady, and incremental support for a national peace process that was the foundation of the approach. When adapted to the context under the overarching philosophy of the Sasakawa Peace Mission, SITES is broadly replicable.

While the Myanmar peace process was generally 'stalled' since 2016 (ICG 2020), amid sporadic negotiations and fluctuating challenges, Yohei Sasakawa and TNF maintained their efforts right up to the shocking military coup of 1st February 2021 that brought the progress of Myanmar peace to a crashing halt and hiatus in progress towards federal democracy. Hoping that the current dark period in Myanmar's progress can end rapidly and the path towards democracy be regained, marshalling the lessons learned, Yohei Sasakawa and TNF remain ready to reapply SITES to a new context for the benefit of the people of Myanmar.

¹ Author's interview with Yoshie Sasakawa, Tokyo, 26 January 2020.

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Peace In Myanmar Is Farther Off Than Before

*Khin Zaw Win**

Introduction

For a country that has suffered seven decades of armed conflict in one form or another incessantly, peace is a precious goal much to be sought after. Yet the quest for that elusive state appears to be under an evil spell. In particular, the most recent period of endeavour beginning in 2011 may be expressed as ‘a hundred glorious beginnings but not a single conclusive outcome’.

That decade has seen two broad, consecutive streams of the ‘peace process’ under two administrations. There were extravaganzas, launchings, dozens of committees, statements, and the funds to go with it, but there was little of substance. There is no denial that conflict and peace in Myanmar constitute a tough nut. The peace process has been accompanied by many academic papers. The flaws in the peace process merit equal if not more attention. This shall bring us to the core of what or who obstructs the attainment of peace.

Brief Background

Like many other colonial entities, the British colony of Burma contained multiple ethnicities, languages, cultures, and religions within its borders. Following the Second World War, which brought much devastation to the country, Burma joined India in pushing for independence. The consensus now is that the process had been too precipitating. Serious disagreements had arisen along ethnic lines – leaders of the Shan and Kayin (the largest non-Bamar ethnic groups) had voiced objections which the central government only partly accommodated. The Bamar were strongly nationalistic, but even then there was an ideological divide between the communists and non-communists.

Just months after independence in 1948, the Burma Communist Party rebelled. In retrospect, there is a sense of it being hounded out of the governing alliance. With a little effort of negotiation, things could have been defused and settled. Nine months later, the Karen National Defence Organization, the forerunner of the Karen National Union (KNU), followed suit. The stage was set for what would become the world’s longest-running civil war.

*Professor Khin Zaw Win, Tampadipa Institute, Yangon, Myanmar.

The Peace Process

The central government regarded the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement as the cornerstone of the peace process. But in 2021, the KNU, one of the leading signatories of the Agreement, was back in the field fighting the junta.

Between them, the military and the National League for Democracy (NLD) government used all means to severely limit the issues and the proceedings at the gala peace events, almost to the point of near-strangulation. For instance, there was endless bickering over the terms 'federal democracy' and 'democratic federalism'.

There was a definite lack of faith in the proceedings. The military's views closely matched those of the NLD. In practice, the military held most of the reins. The others were expected to meekly submit to the centre's programme and timetable.

The Great Divide of 2021

The military coup of February 2021 overturned many things. If the coup had not happened, it would seem likely that the 21st Century Peace Conference series would have continued, despite the severe lack of progress and interest. That it became a casualty of the takeover does not present a cause for much regret or worry.

The nature of the conflicts before and after the coup are greatly different. As to resolution, even before the coup, the effort was stalling. Now the prospects for peace have receded considerably.

Table 1: Armed conflicts

	Pre-2021	2021 and After
Opponents of the Centre	Ethnicities and ethnic armed organisations. There had been Bamar in the BCP and the ABSDF post-1988. Neither are viable entities now.	Large segments of the entire population spread over the country – urban and rural. Formed into PDFs, some of which are under existing EAOs.
Issues	Autonomy, self-determination, shades of federalism Human rights abuses, religious discrimination	Opposing military junta rule
Political Solution?	What everyone expected was held up by 'dual state' of military and the NLD.	None at present. The great challenge for the country and ASEAN.

Source: Compiled by the author.

Many things about Myanmar are being re-written. The confusion that has plagued assessments of the country is being cleared in the days since the coup of 1 February. Most importantly, where the military institution stands, where the NLD stands, and where each individual stands on the overarching issues. In this tragic and bloody period, we can tally how much each institution has lost, in some cases irrevocably.

If one compares the past decade in Myanmar to what is happening now, it was a bright, sunlit and hopeful period, albeit with downswings like the Rohingya crisis. Myanmar opened up in many ways, and one of the developments was international conferences and seminars. One stark question that has to be raised is: how useful were they, in light of what has happened since February this year? We have to ruefully admit that there is a profound disconnect between intellectual and political discourse and how the country is governed.

This major factor plays into the numbing frequency of what amounts to leadership failure in Myanmar – civilian and military, term after term, decade after decade. Academic assessments of this failure are good, but this failing has real-life implications. Millions of people are paying for it. Before the elections of November 2020, I had been publicly drawing attention to irregularities and the threat of responses like the coup.

The diverse 53 million people have endured civil war, dictatorship, military brutality, and economic exploitation. Myanmar can lay claim to a longer legacy of democracy than other countries in South East Asia. The colonial power had initiated a limited form of democracy in the 1930s. That is one reason the people set great store by it and are willing to fight and die for it. Aung San Su Kyi and the generals in the lead-up to the coup both played it like a palace power struggle with no concern for the people. It is the massive public response that makes Myanmar truly democratic.



Source: Mid-Term Review of ASEAN Economic Community Blueprint 2025

The protests and the brutality of what has become the common enemy have brought about a rethinking of democracy and inclusiveness. The present uprising has been called a 'leaderless' revolution. I have said elsewhere that it is impossible to predict the outcome of a revolution. It is far from being a linear process. Myanmar, in a way, is struggling out of the ruts and templates of the past. Besides, the edifice of Burman ethnic dominance has been shattered irreparably.

There are many amazing things about this 'leaderless' revolution and many heart-rending ones too. The 'pacted transition' that many people counted on following the 1988 uprising has fallen apart. Many scholarly writings may have to be thrown away. From the excessive and appalling way the military has responded to the protests, there can be only one outcome, and that is revolution. Both the junta and the opposition are locked into rigid positions at present, precluding any hope of mediation or reconciliation.

Many protesters and other people, including children, have been killed by the security forces. The Myanmar military's pre-eminence is also dead, and so is the idea of a single Bamar dominant majority, and so is exclusionary thinking. These things are rarely, if ever, juxtaposed. I would say this is the first time in history it has happened. A huge vacuum has opened up in the Myanmar centre and will remain for the foreseeable future.

On 22 April 2022, junta chief Min Aung Hlaing (MAH) invited Ethnic Armed Organization(EAO) leaders to meet with him individually to discuss peace matters. He is following the playbook from 1989 and the 1990s, cutting ceasefire deals with individual EAOs, notably the Wa and Kokang, the consequences of which are still felt today.

But there is more: the military announced that it would respond if its positions and units were attacked during this period. Ordinarily, this would be taken as a matter of course. But coming at this time, it underscores that the military is badly in need of a respite from the fighting. They have declared ceasefires several times, but nobody takes them seriously anymore. MAH recently proclaimed 'a year of peace', and the reaction is the same. The predominant public reaction is that MAH's overtures should not be accepted, and the offensive has to go on.

Conclusion

1 February 2021 has turned the page for Myanmar, but no one can predict the future. I am listing below what I see as some immutable trends.

The image of the armed forces has been smashed. The political party and the politicians have come out poorly. Both will change, and democracy will be transformed in the years ahead. The truism has been revived that guns count for more than votes. New concepts and structures are emerging.

The stalled movement towards federalism and peace has been turned on its head. The EAOs will have a bigger role in building federalism compared to parties. In several ways, a federal army will precede political federalism. The 'peace' being pushed by the Bamar military, the NLD, and 'experts' is in the trash bin. A completely new entity will be born. Moreover, the Westphalian concept is less and less relevant to Myanmar. The 'Myanmar sovereign state' is further weakened, and the military will finish it off.

The junta has already lost on two counts: in spirit and principles. It can never match the spirit of the Myanmar people, which we see every day. It can never utilise this spirit either. As for principles, the people go out to the streets, not because of a leader or ideology but because the seizure of power has abused their principles.

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ASEAN's Peace Effort in Myanmar

Chheang Vannarith*

The military coup in February 2021 marked a critical turning point in Myanmar's political development, from a promising to a disappointing trend. The coup has destroyed the foundation of democracy built over a short period, from 2015 to 2021, after decades of military rule. It has also put the country into a political and economic crisis, compounded by public health crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak.

The Myanmar crisis is a test of ASEAN's unity and centrality. ASEAN is not institutionally designed to deal with the internal crisis of its member states. However, the unfolding political and humanitarian crises in Myanmar have serious regional security implications. Therefore, ASEAN is compelled to respond to the crisis.

According to the latest UN report, the number of internally displaced people in Myanmar has reached 1 million, with almost 700,000 being forced to relocate due to the eruption of violence after the military seized power in February 2021. Moreover, more than 40,000 refugees have crossed borders into neighbouring countries. Notably, the security forces in Myanmar have killed at least 1,600 people and detained more than 12,500 since the coup (UN 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic, weakening public service delivery due to civil disobedience movement, economic downturn, and soaring prices on essential commodities such as food and fuel are multiple crises affecting the Myanmar people.



Source: Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, Cambodia

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Engagement is generally believed to be the only viable way to address the Myanmar crisis. The key question is how to effectively engage different stakeholders to promote peace dialogue and cease violence.

The ASEAN's 'Five-Point Consensus' on Myanmar outlined key strategic objectives to restore normalcy but did not elaborate on the engagement strategy. Cambodia, the rotating chair of ASEAN, has adopted a different approach by having no pre-conditions for having dialogues with the military junta and other stakeholders in Myanmar.

Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen's high-profile visit to Myanmar on 7–8 January 2022 was a critical ice-breaking moment in ASEAN's engagement with Myanmar- this is the fact. Cambodia neither has hidden geopolitical agenda nor economic interests in Myanmar. It does not have any ambition to impose its view on Myanmar but just wants to share its experience regarding the peace-making and peacebuilding process.

At the second meeting between Prime Minister Hun Sen and Senior General Min Aung Hlaing on 26 January 2022, Cambodia again urged Myanmar to implement the ASEAN's 'Five-Point Consensus', facilitate the visit of the ASEAN Special Envoy, end all forms of violence, and cooperate on humanitarian assistance.

The ASEAN Special Envoy and his team managed to make their visits to Myanmar in March and June to facilitate humanitarian assistance and create a conducive environment for dialogue among different stakeholders to cease the violence. Cambodian Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs PrakSokhonn said before his second visit to Myanmar that he tried to push forward five agendas, namely "the cessation of violence, constructive engagement, Covid-19 vaccinations, humanitarian relief, and optimism".

The humanitarian assistance front seems to be moving ahead of other agendas. For example, the multistakeholder consultative meeting on ASEAN humanitarian assistance to Myanmar was held in May 2022 to address three key issues, namely humanitarian assistance delivery arrangement framework, operational challenges of the delivery of humanitarian assistance, and a framework for COVID-19 vaccine administration.

The meeting agreed to deliver humanitarian assistance in a timely, effective, safe, and non-discriminatory manner. Prak Sokhonn underlined that humanitarian programmes must have a long-term impact, and the access, safety, and security of all implementing parties, including the ASEAN monitoring team, must be guaranteed.

The Tatmadaw has been trying to set or dominate the terms of engagement. Nevertheless, the Cambodian ASEAN chair has been trying to stick to the core objectives of ASEAN and the terms of engagement set by ASEAN by demanding the Tatmadaw to grant access to the Special Envoy to meet with all key stakeholders, including Aung San Suu Kyi.

Why is Cambodia so committed to helping Myanmar? Here are some facts. First, Cambodia suffered from a prolonged civil war for almost three decades, so it does not wish to see any country endure such pain and suffering. Cambodia is willing to help the people of Myanmar live in peace.

Second, as the rotating chair of ASEAN, Cambodia is obliged to address issues facing the region. The Myanmar crisis is at the top of the agenda. If it chose to play low and not to act, Cambodia would be blamed for not being a responsible chair. Hence, it is better to act than do nothing. Helping Myanmar also means helping ASEAN.

Third, Cambodia is a small country in Southeast Asia, and it always regards ASEAN as the cornerstone of its foreign policy. Like other members, Cambodia views ASEAN as a shield to protect and advance its national interests. Therefore, there is no reason for Cambodia to weaken or split ASEAN.

It is worth noting that immediately after the military coup in February 2021, Prime Minister Hun Sen publicly stated that it was an internal affair of Myanmar and that Cambodia would never interfere in the internal affairs of other countries. Non-interference is the core guiding principle of Cambodia's foreign policy.

However, regional circumstances have obliged Cambodia to play a proactive role in the Myanmar issue because ASEAN's credibility and relevance need to be protected. The Myanmar issue is truly a litmus test for ASEAN. As violence continues to take place and people are still suffering, ASEAN is compelled to respond to demonstrate its moral responsibility.

Cambodia has taken a bold, decisive step, with a carefully crafted responsible engagement strategy, hoping to make a breakthrough in the Myanmar issue. Prime Minister Hun Sen is the architect of the engagement strategy with Myanmar. He viewed his first visit to Myanmar as a 'planting a tree' mission, meaning that solving the Myanmar crisis would require time and patience.

The engagement strategy with Myanmar is based on the 'Five-Point Consensus', adopted by the ASEAN leaders in April 2021, and the ASEAN Charter. Four practical steps being implemented are the followings.

First, ending violence and enforcing a ceasefire. Meaningful dialogue and negotiation may not be possible unless ceasefire and non-violence are observed by all the parties concerned. This is the most critical step in the peace negotiation process.

Second, protecting people's lives and livelihood. The right to life and livelihood is the most important human right. Therefore, it is necessary to coordinate and facilitate humanitarian assistance programmes so that aid can reach those in need without discrimination or disruptions.

Third, facilitating inclusive political dialogues. The ASEAN Special Envoy plays a crucial role in promoting mutual understanding and trust between and among the different stakeholders in Myanmar, based on which meaningful and substantive dialogue and negotiation can occur.

Fourth, ensuring a peaceful and democratic power transition. A free and fair election with the participation of all political parties is the means toward a peaceful transition. The State Administration Council (SAC) announced its plan to hold an election in August 2023. Therefore, ASEAN needs to monitor the election process closely to ensure it is acceptable to all parties.

To realise this goal, Cambodia proposed for the formation of an ASEAN Troika, consisting of former, current, and future ASEAN chairs plus the Secretary-General of ASEAN to work as a close-knit team to implement, monitor, and evaluate the progress of implementing the five-point consensus. However, the Tatmadaw was reluctant to support this proposal.

ASEAN needs to develop a detailed roadmap with a specific time frame to effectively enforce the Five-Point Consensus and empower the ASEAN Special Envoy to carry out the mission. Otherwise, the SAC will continue to dictate the terms of engagement and impose restrictions on the work of the Special Envoy.

Myanmar people themselves will define their country's future. Therefore, the peace-making and peacebuilding process must be led and owned by Myanmar. At best, what the Cambodia ASEAN Chair can do for the people of Myanmar is to set the foundation for future solutions to the political crisis, reduce violence, facilitate humanitarian assistance, and create a conducive environment for inclusive political dialogues among all parties concerned.

Concerning restoring democracy, the Indonesian Chair of ASEAN in 2023 might need to develop an ASEAN roadmap to assist Myanmar in returning to the democratic path, especially to ensure that the elections in Myanmar will be free, fair, and inclusive. Democracy and peace are intrinsically intertwined. Peace cannot be sustained if foundations of democracy are not stable and deeply rooted. The journey to peace and democracy in Myanmar takes time. Therefore, ASEAN needs to be optimistic and agile.

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Separatist Conflict and Peace Process in Southern Thailand

*Rungrawee Chalernsripinyorat**

2022 marked the nineteenth year of the resurgence of violent insurgency in Thailand's predominantly Malay-Muslim South. It is one of the deadliest separatist conflicts in Southeast Asia. Despite the high casualties, the conflict has received scant attention from the region. The conflict in Southern Thailand is essentially rooted in the annexation of the Patani sultanate by Thailand (formerly known as Siam) in the early twentieth century. Since then, the Thai state has used an assimilation policy to integrate Malay Muslim minorities into the Buddhist-dominated country. The Malay Muslims initially reacted with strong yet peaceful resistance.

Facing severe suppression by the Thai state, an armed movement emerged in the 1960s, seeking independence for the Muslim majority region. Violent resistance continued over several decades, albeit waxed and waned (see Surin 1985; Che Man 1990). In 2004, the violence dramatically escalated, making it the bloodiest phase of this separatist conflict. According to Deep South Watch (DSW), more than 21,500 incidents have occurred since 2004, in which some 7,350 people were killed and 13,650 injured (as of April 2022). The conflict was initially characterised as a fight with 'ghosts', as there were no groups that claimed responsibility for those violent attacks (Liow and Pathan 2010; Askew 2010).



Source: National Security Council of Thailand

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Formal Peace Process: Some Progress and Challenges

The dynamic of the conflict has shifted after the launch of a formal peace process by the Yingluck Shinawatra government in 2013. With the facilitation of Kuala Lumpur, the Thai government and the Barisan Revolusi Nasional Melayu Patani (Patani Malay National Revolutionary Front -BRN) became engaged in a formalised peace dialogue. It was the first time the Thai state held formal and publicly announced talks with a separatist group. The initiative prompted actors behind the violence to emerge from underground. The BRN began communicating with the public through mainstream media and social media (Rungrawee 2019).

When General Prayut Chan-ocha took power through a military coup in 2014 and subsequently assumed the premiership, the BRN refused to participate in the military-led peace process. Mara Patani (Majlis Syura Patani, Patani Consultative Council) —an umbrella organisation of separatist groups mainly based in Malaysia— was formed to represent the Thai government’s dialogue partner at the negotiating table.

Mara Patani comprised four liberation movements – Barisan Islam Pembebasan Patani (Patani Islamic Liberation Front – BIPP), Patani United Liberation Organisation (PULO), Gerakan Mujahideen Islam Patani (Patani Islamic Mujahideen Movement – GMIP) and a few BRN members. Mara Patani suffered a serious legitimacy deficit due to its perceived lack of control and command over fighters on the ground. Therefore, the peace talks made little progress under military rule. However, statistics showed that annual fatalities have been on a downward trend since 2013. This largely resulted from the BRN’s shifting strategy to garner sympathy and support from the international community rather than the success of counterinsurgency operations.

Following five years of military rule, Thailand held a general election in 2019, paving the way for a new chapter in the peace dialogue in January 2020. Years of backchannel talks known as the ‘Berlin Initiative’ brokered by a Europe-based organisation facilitated the BRN’s return to the dialogue table. At the national level, Prayut won a second term in one of the most controversial general elections. He later appointed General Wanlop Rugsanaoh, who had previously headed the National Security Council, to lead the Thai peace dialogue panel. The BRN also appointed a new dialogue team, which was led by Anas Abdulrahman (aka Hipni Mareh), formerly the BRN’s head of political wing. Anas received higher education in Indonesia and Egypt and was a former ustaz (religious teacher) at Thamavitya Mulniti School in Yala province.

The renewed peace talks showed some promise. Ahead of the January 2020 peace talks, the Thai dialogue team had softened its stance by allowing national and international observers to attend the dialogue “in their personal capacity”. The BRN had long called for the involvement of independent observers in the peace dialogue to enhance the credibility of the process. However, the Thai state had been extremely cautious about involving international organisations in this process. Moreover, the

dialogue was significantly disrupted by the Covid-19 pandemic, which led to the imposition of travel restrictions curtailing the prospect of in-person formal meetings.

As the Covid-19 situation improved nearly two years later, the peace dialogue resumed on 11–12 January 2022. Representatives of the Thai government and BRN reached a deal to begin the discussion on three substantive matters: 1) reduction of violence, 2) public consultations, and 3) political solution (BBC Thai, 11 January 2022). Both sides also agreed to set up contact persons and joint working groups for further discussion on these matters. This is a significant development as it indicates that the peace talk is about to shift from procedural matters and confidence-building measures to substance. This agreement also shows that both sides are willing to make this process inclusive and welcome the engagement of other stakeholders. The peace dialogue cannot exclusively be a matter between the state and an armed group. Other stakeholders need to be included in the process.

Further progress was made following the second round of talk on 31 March – 1 April 2022, during which the dialogue parties endorsed the ‘General Principles of the Peace Dialogue Process’, outlining the substantive matters to be discussed in a formal document. In addition, both sides agreed on the 40-day ‘Peaceful Ramadan Initiative’ to foster the public’s confidence in the peace talk (Benar News, 1 April 2022).

After the end of the holy month, the Thai military declared the Ramadan Peace Initiative a success, identifying only one security-related incident, for which the PULO claimed responsibility (Isra News Agency, 8 May 2022). On 15 April 2022, insurgents planted two bombs in Pattani’s Saiburi district, killing one civilian and injuring three officers. At the bomb site, police found a flyer showing the image of a tiger with the phrase “Daulat Tuanku” (Long Live the King): “G5 Askar di Raja Patani” (G5 “Soldiers of the Patani King”). Kasturi Mahkota, the PULO leader, publicly stated that the attack had been carried out by G5 — one of its five operation units (Benar News, 15 April 2022).

The PULO tried to use this military operation to make itself heard and expressed willingness to participate in the peace talk. Yet, Kasturi stated that the PULO would only join if the talk was not curtailed by the Thai constitution, which stipulates that the country is an indivisible unitary state (Benar News, 18 April 2022). His statement appeared to be a game of bluff as the BRN representatives were previously questioned whether it abandoned its ultimate goal of fighting for merdeka (independence) by accepting to participate in the peace talk under the Thai constitutional framework. The tension between the BRN and Mara Patani remains, with the former seeing the latter as ‘opportunists’. The BRN viewed the formalised peace talk as a result of its painstaking and lengthy struggle and that it deserved to have a leading role and be given credit. Abu Hafez Al-Hakim, Mara Patani spokesman, told the author that the BRN had refused to accept other separatist groups to join the dialogue team. Although the military capacity of other separatist groups is apparently inferior to that they should be allowed to participate in the peace talk as members of the Patani communities.

While the Ramadan Peace Initiative yielded a good result, the rally of thousands of Malay Muslim youths on 4 May in “Perhimpunan Melayu Raya 2022” (The 2022 Assembly of Melayu Raya) to mark the end of the holy month risked derailing the peace process as it sparked fear among the Thai security forces. Organised by the Civil Society Assembly for Peace (CAP)—an umbrella organisation of civil society organisations in the Deep South representing several nationalist Malay Muslim groups, more than 10,000 youths in traditional colourful Malay costumes gathered at Wasukri Beach in Pattani’s Saiburi district in a display of their ethnic and cultural identities. Most controversial was a BRN flag — a crescent moon and a star in green, red and white background— was seen being flown among the large crowd, raising concern if the event had a hidden political agenda.

At the end of the event, a youth representative read out a pledge, expressing the commitment of Patani youths to be loyal to ‘religion, nation and motherland’ (The Motive’s Facebook page, 7 May 2022). Muhammad Aladi Dengni, CAP leader, revealed that his staff had screened participants to ensure they did not carry any flags or symbols that could be deemed illegal to the rally. However, this BRN flag escaped the screening and was flown for a few minutes before being told to be put down. It became a drama when a photograph of the BRN flag was circulated on social media, prompting the security forces to call in the organisers for questioning.

Peace Process: Cautious Optimism

In light of recent developments, there are reasons for cautious optimism. First, it remains doubtful to what extent the Thai state is willing to provide political space for the BRN and other Malay Muslims to express their alternative political visions. The fact that some government agencies were disturbed by the BRN flag shown at the rally of Malay Muslim youths suggests that they are still trapped in the old paradigm, which sees any expression related to the BRN as a violation of the Thai law. Therefore, there is a need for a paradigm shift for the Thai state to pursue the next step in the search for political solutions. I propose that the BRN should be perceived as ‘a political party’ and that its members and sympathisers should be free to express their political opinions. As long as their political aspirations are expressed by peaceful means, they should be permitted to do so. Any suppression would again push them underground and provoke violent responses. This would go against the Thai government’s intention to search for ‘political solutions’.

Secondly, the tension between the ‘hawks’ and the ‘doves’ within the Thai state and the BRN could derail the peace process. On the Thai side, some hawkish military commanders are sceptical of the approach being taken by the Thai peace dialogue team, which is seen as being too soft on the BRN. They viewed the permit of free-flow movement of people during the holy month as a misstep that enabled the BRN to remobilise. Any further move by the Thai peace dialogue panel that raises a serious concern for the government and other relevant state agencies could lead to a collapse

of the current peace process. In the same vein, some BRN members, particularly those in the military wing, previously objected strongly to the movement's engagement in the peace talk. While the presence of Deng Awaechi, a senior leader of the BRN's military wing, during the second round of the talk this year suggests that the current BRN dialogue team has a buy-in from its armed force, there remains a possibility that some elements in the armed unit could seek to spoil the process.

Last, whether and to what extent the Thai government is willing to make the political concession remains unclear. The broader political climate in Thailand remains un conducive to forging a consensus on an array of political solutions for the protracted conflict. The military's domination of Thai politics continues to pose a challenge for peacebuilding, as it is doubtful if the Prayut government is willing to make any political concessions. The growing anti-establishment movement led mainly by Thai youths has the potential to alter the trajectory of national politics, which could make significant impacts on the peace process in the Deep South. Nevertheless, the anti-military forces in the parliamentary system are unlikely to defeat the pro-establishment camp in the next general elections. It is nearly impossible for other political parties to compete with the military-dominated Palang Pracharath Party, or other new pro-establishment parties, in forming the government as the latter continue to have the backing of the 250-member Senate in the appointment of a new prime minister, as stipulated in the 2017 Constitution's transitory provisions. Over the longer term, the success of the peace dialogue will be inextricably linked to the trajectory of national politics and Thailand's broader democratisation process.

¹ Author's interview with a Thai officer directly involved in the peace dialogue, February 14, 2020.

² Author's personal communication, 18 April 2022.

³ Author's personal communication, 27 May 2022.

⁴ Author's personal communication with a source close to the Thai dialogue panel, 14 May 2022.

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Cambodia's Win-Win Policy and International Peace Theories

*Sim Vireak**



Source: <https://pixabay.com/id/photos/tengara-taman-umum-5415897/>

Introduction

Peace is like oxygen that people tend to take for granted. One never knows that it is important unless one falls into a situation that requires assistance from an oxygen concentrator, but that would be too late. Several countries in the world are choked with bloodshed because their leaders and political parties are breathing the air of antagonism, mutual elimination, and power struggles at the expense of national and/or international peace. It takes only a short time to start a war but ending it and building peace requires generations.

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Cambodia's three decades of civil war had sowed distrust and a vicious cycle of structural violence on top of the mutually annihilating behaviour and social destruction. As a result, the whole society had lost every chance of development, as poverty, illiteracy, malnutrition, and the deprivation of basic human rights became the norms.

Full peace was achieved in 1998, thanks to the Win-Win Policy, which refers to the national reconciliation policy crafted and implemented by Prime Minister Hun Sen from 1996 to 1998 to end the more than three decades of civil war through dismantling the Khmer Rouge's political organisation and integrating them into the social, economic, and political life of the Cambodian state.

Not much research has been done on this topic due to the international perception that peace was fully restored after the 1993 United Nations-administered elections. However, this perception has gradually changed. More scholars and journalists have started to acknowledge that the 1993 election was merely one building block of the long peace-building process and was not a definitive point of peace attainment (Ashley 1998; Hunt 2019).

Discussion on Cambodia's peacebuilding tends to adopt two opposite extremes, the 'overemphasis on external intervention' and the 'nationalistic monopoly of peace'. The former group thinks the international community should have been more assertive in Cambodia's peace process and should not have heeded political compromise with the Hun Sen government. They believe that the international community had an obligation to bring peace to the Cambodian people. However, they tended to ignore the limited time and resources that the international community could commit (Evans 1994; Miletic 2016).

In contrast, the 'nationalistic monopoly of peace' paradigm seeks to give credit to local actors and initiatives. Indeed, historical facts showed the roles of local actors in achieving peace (Pol 2014; Nem 2012; Chay 2019; Path 2017; Dy and Dearing 2014). However, as war lingered on, local stakeholders monopolised the peace process because international intervention could not endure the lengthy peace-building process that could take decades. Aid fatigue and human resource exhaustion are the limits of international intervention.

Nevertheless, it is not right to suggest that total peace can be achieved without external involvement because if international actors had continued to provide military, diplomatic, and political support or even media support to rebel groups, secessionist groups, or groups that were seeking to overthrow the government, peace attained by local stakeholders would not withstand. Thus, on top of the domestic stakeholders' commitment to peacebuilding, durable peace requires direct and indirect support from the international community for state legitimacy.

International Peace Theories

There are many peace theories. One of the most prominent ones is by Johan Galtung, the so-called 'positive' and 'negative' peace (see Galtung 1969). Peace does not merely mean the total absence of any conflict. It means the absence of violence in all forms, and conflicts are solved constructively. This is called 'positive peace', which indicates the simultaneous presence of many desirable dimensions of mind and society, such as harmony, justice, equity, and sustainable development.

Another important theory is on 'reconciliation' by Louis Kriesberg. He identifies four dimensions of reconciliation essential for conflict transformation and peacebuilding in post-war societies: shared truth, justice, regard, and security (Kriesberg 2011; Fischer 2011).

'Truth' is important as societies divided after mass crimes tend to deny what members of the other side have experienced. Thus, they need to openly recognise that they have different views of reality. They might develop a shared truth at a higher level, supported by official investigations, judicial proceedings, and literary and mass media reporting to acknowledge the abuses that had occurred.

'Justice' is needed, as those who have suffered oppression or atrocities seek redress, which may take the form of restitution or compensation, but also the punishment of those who committed injustice. Justice may furthermore be exhibited in politics offering protection against future harm and discrimination.

'Expression of regard' by members of each community towards one another entails recognising the humanity of the others and their human rights.

'Security', in the sense of personal or collective safety and well-being, is a constitutive part of reconciliation. Security exists as the adversaries feel a minimum of trust and have reason to believe they can look forward to living together without one side threatening the other.

Lessons from Cambodia's Peacebuilding Experience

War Cannot End War

Based on Prime Minister Hun Sen's Win-Win Policy, the most important lesson that can be drawn from the Cambodian experience is that 'war cannot end war'. Only peace negotiation, mutual understanding, and at times, mutual compromise and concession can lead to the attainment of peace because no single party can afford to be seen as a loser. Because, sometimes, losing can be synonymous with death in warring societies.

The Importance of Security

Peace negotiators need to identify the 'security' dimension within the 'reconciliation' process because it can help address the concerns of interlocutors. Integrating an armed faction into a government's armed forces to end a civil war is not easy, as the risk is too high for both sides. However, the guarantee of survival and trust towards such a guarantee is a must.

Hun Sen devised the basic conditions of the Win-Win Policy based on three core elements: the guarantee of life, the guarantee of employment and status, and the guarantee of personal properties. Such conditions bode well with some elements of the Khmer Rouge although trust was a key factor in implementing each step of the Win-Win Policy.

To win the trust of the Khmer Rouge's potential defection groups, Hun Sen had risked his life to go to their strongholds, as he tried to integrate them into the Cambodian society. Trust is the most important factor in executing the high-risk policy among factions that had fought one another for decades. Hun Sen said:

My mother and aunt, both of whom have passed away already, asked me in closed-door why I decided to go to the enemy region. I told them that if the worst happened, only I and perhaps a hundred other people going with me would die, but if it did not happen, I would have the whole country back in peace. Let's imagine if I did not go to Malay, Phnom Proeuk, Kamrieng and Samlot, would those people have trust in the Win-Win Policy. (Cambodia New Vision, 21 January 2008)

Elimination of Structural Violence

The possession of armed forces by various political groups and factions was one critical factor for the prolonged civil war or structural violence in Cambodia. With an armed organisation, a political group can become rebels anytime or a force for coup d'état whenever their group deems the conditions or power-sharing arrangements are less beneficial for them.

International actors are also critical regarding the issue of war prolongation. Under the heat of the Cold War, Cambodia's civil war lingered, with warring factions receiving the supply of arms and diplomatic, media, and financial support from foreign actors with different geopolitical interests. This is called the proxy war. Such a geopolitical dimension also created structural violence to prolong the war.

Without the consent from all the P5 countries at the end of the Cold War, the Paris Peace Agreements would not have been possible. The peace treaty was one critical step to eliminating structural violence in the Cambodia's civil war.

Another step of eliminating structural violence was carried out by Cambodia itself. After completing the 1998 integration through the Win-Win Policy, the Cambodians finally eliminated the major cause of structural violence.

The whole armed factions fell under the command of a single national army, which was unprecedented in modern Cambodian history.

Making Durable Peace

Restoring peace is important, but making it durable is also equally important. One of the four dimensions of reconciliation, according to Kriesberg, is the 'expression of regard' by members of one community towards another that entails recognising the humanity of the other and their human rights, including political rights and freedom.

Liberal multi-party democracy is considered the cornerstone for such 'regard' that supports the 'positive peace', which is based on ballots, not bullets. This democratic dimension was included in the long-term development and the post-Win-Win Policy peacebuilding process. Citizens in Anlong Veng, the Khmer Rouge's last stronghold, were allowed to exercise their rights in the national elections in July 1998.

Violence during elections has gradually disappeared from the Cambodian political scene. This is a fact in Cambodian political history showing the maturity of the country's political culture, as it is making good progress towards 'positive peace'.

Nowadays, peace and sustainable development are mutually reinforcing. Peace cannot be maintained with poverty, hunger, inequality, unemployment, injustice, poor public services, and weak governance. Prime Minister Hun Sen said:

Implementing the Win-Win Policy is making no one a winner or a loser. After each victory on the battlefield, what to gain from fighting were all sorts of rifles, but at this moment, the gain that we all are collecting is the Peace Bridge and other bailey bridges, school buildings, hospitals, canals, and roads. (Cambodia New Vision, 20 May 2003)

To achieve peace is not yet complete. Peace and development must go hand in hand. We would not be able to maintain peace if we did not develop. It is with that perception that I have declared, on behalf of the Cambodian People's Party, that I will transform former battlefields into development zones and markets. In reality, starting in Banteay Meanchey province all the way to Komrieng, Phnom Proek, Sampeo Loun and Pailin, cassavas have been planted in large areas, and we had to negotiate with the Thai authority recently to allow a trade to proceed in a timely manner. So you see, our people no longer have to displace on their own soil but station and settle down with production and trade activities, though road access and schools for children are still issues to be resolved. (Cambodia New Vision, 9 April 2012)

Peace cannot be sustained without quality education, healthcare, proper and equal access to social security, decent work, and economic growth. Such a long list of requirements means that peace is extremely difficult to build and sustain. Therefore, maintaining the existing peace should be the top priority of every government, if not the whole world.

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Vietnam: Rising from the Ashes of War to Contributing to Regional Peace

*Lena Le**

For more than 4,000 years of history, Vietnam has gone through at least 1,200 years of wars and conflicts. In its contemporary history, the country has experienced merely 45 years of complete peace. The international image of Vietnam is often associated with battlefields, soldiers, victims, and mass destruction. Thus, no less than many nations in the world, Vietnamese people fully understand the true meaning of peace and stability for the existence and development of one country. Indeed, coming out from decades of wars, Vietnam has been turning itself from a country of economic stagnation, trade embargo, and diplomatic isolation into an active, self-motivated, and responsible one in Southeast Asia (SEA). Vietnam's contributions to regional peace manifest in its peace-oriented foreign policies, its accession to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and its efforts in seeking peaceful means of dispute settlement and preserving regional unity and solidarity.

Foreign Policy Line of Peace and Integration

The turning point in the relationship between Vietnam and the international community came from the shift in Vietnam's perception of the international relations of SEA and the world. It followed the implementation of the Doi Moi policy in 1986. Accordingly, Vietnam decided to "expand relations with all countries on the principles of peaceful coexistence" (CPV 1987, 225). To SEA, Vietnam "wants and is willing to work with countries in the region to negotiate and resolve issues in Southeast Asia, establish peaceful coexistence and build Southeast Asia into a region of peace, stability and cooperation" (Ibid, 108).

In 1988, Resolution No.13/NQ-TW of the 6th Politburo of the Party Central Committee on "Duties and Foreign Policies in the New Situation" regarded peace and economic development as the supreme interest, followed by the policy of changing the struggle from confrontation to coexistence in peace (Le 2017, 81–82). This view continued to be re-emphasised in the Report of the 6th Plenum of the 6th Central Committee (March 1989) and the Platform on National Construction in the period of transition to socialism (1991) of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV).

The shift in Vietnam's awareness of regional peace translated into its renewed perception of the importance of regional institutions and Vietnam's participation in those mechanisms. Directive No. 25 CT/ TW, issued on 8 August 2018, of the Secretariat

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of the Party Central Committee focusing on enhancing the role of multilateral diplomacy stated that the country would need to shift from only “attending” to “actively participating” and “actively contributing” to multilateral institutions. Furthermore, Vietnam’s Defense White Paper 2019 underscored, “Vietnam highly values and actively participates in multilateral cooperation on security issues through international and regional organizations such as the UN, ASEAN, ARF and APEC” (Vietnam’s Ministry of National Defense 2019, 27). These aforementioned guidelines illustrated that Vietnam considers peace and stability of the region significant for Vietnam’s own security and development. In return, Hanoi also believes its peace-oriented foreign policy is an integral part of regional peace.

Becoming a Proactive ASEAN’s Member

Policy innovation after Doi Moi was an impetus turning Vietnam from a country isolated from the international community to one with diplomatic relations with 230 countries worldwide and the most strategic partnerships in the Asia-Pacific region (Le and Hoang 2021). From a raw member, Vietnam has gradually become an active and proactive member of ASEAN, especially in the defense and security realm. The accession of Vietnam to ASEAN holds a symbolic and practical importance to both Vietnam and ASEAN. To Vietnam, ASEAN membership is an obvious assertion that the country is opening to the world and willing to be a friend and partner to all countries as well as international organisations. Moreover, joining ASEAN laid the ground for the Vietnamese economy to gradually become integrated into SEA and the world.

Meanwhile, Vietnam’s membership brought SEA from “confrontation to dialogue, from distrust to trust, [and] from division to solidarity” (Pham 2020). Besides, the admission of Vietnam as ASEAN’s seventh member accelerated the enlargement of the group to include all the ten countries, thereby strengthening the legitimacy of ASEAN as a fully-fledged representative of the region, reducing the risk of security threats from great powers’ competition for influence, preventing the interference of great powers into the region, and spreading norms to the whole SEA. As a result, the SEA Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone Treaty (SEANWFZ) and the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) are recognised far and wide.

In practice, Vietnam has also made considerable contributions to bringing to life numerous initiatives conducive to the relations between ASEAN and ASEAN’s partners. For instance, Vietnam was one of the initiators of the ASEAN Defense Minister’s Meeting Plus. In addition, it called for the establishment of direct hotlines between ASEAN and partners’ defence ministers such as China and Japan. It also proposed the US support ASEAN in promoting ASEAN’s defence capability in the field of maritime security, humanitarian assistance, and disaster relief among others.

¹There is no official figure on the exact number of years that Vietnam went through wars and conflicts. The figure used in this paper was obtained from an interview with Professor Hoang Khac Nam, University of Social Sciences and Humanities.

Upholding the Principle of Peaceful Dispute Settlement and Preserving ASEAN Unity

However, the most proactive steps taken by Vietnam towards regional stability have revolved around its steadfast stance on peaceful settlement of international disputes and keeping ASEAN united in a changing strategic environment. Amidst the shifting global political landscape, especially the rapidly intensifying competition in the South China Sea (SCS), as a direct claimant, Vietnam has maintained its persistent voice to push for the SCS issue to be put on the agenda for constructive dialogue and consistently emphasised ASEAN centrality in facilitating regional dispute management.



Source: https://www.freepik.com/free-vector/asean-map_10951680.htm#query=asean&position=1&from_view=search

As a result, Vietnam and the Philippines played a key role in drafting the 1999 ASEAN Code of Conduct (CoC), the document on which ASEAN would work with China to adopt an ASEAN-China CoC. However, differences in the positions of China and ASEAN led to the creation of the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC), a less binding document, instead of the CoC in 2002. Since then, for the past twenty years, Vietnam has been consistent in calling for the acceleration of the CoC negotiations. As Vietnamese MOFA Deputy Spokesperson Nguyen Phương Tra stated, “It is of utmost importance to reach a COC that is [substantive] and effective, in accordance with international law, especially the 1982 UNCLOS, thereby effectively contributing to peace, stability and security in the SCS as well as the broader region” (Le 2019, 4).

Under the chairmanship of Vietnam, the 36th ASEAN Leader's Vision Statement, issued in 2020, reaffirmed, "The importance of maintaining and promoting peace, security, stability, safety, and freedom of navigation and over-flight above the South China Sea, as well as upholding international law, including the 1982 UNCLOS, in the South China Sea" (ASEAN 2020).

ASEAN's internal relations is another focus of Vietnam. Solidarity and unity are the sources of the Association's power. They form the organisation's common identity, enable ASEAN to implement joint plans effectively, maintain the legitimacy of the Association, and reduce the risk of it being interfered with by outsiders. In the speech by then Vietnam's Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung at the 24th ASEAN Summit in 2014, he requested that ASEAN strengthen solidarity and unity and strongly affirm the principles enshrined in the Six-Point principles on the SCS. In 2020, for the second time as the chair of ASEAN, Vietnam chose "Cohesive and Responsive" as the theme for its ASEAN year. The key priorities of its chairmanship included "unity and solidarity", "partnership" and "institutional capacity", among others. Similarly, in 2021, at the opening ceremony of the AMM54, Vietnamese Foreign Minister Bui Thanh Son maintained unity and solidarity as the cornerstone of ASEAN's strength in difficult times (Nguyen 2021).

In addition to advocating for ASEAN's solidarity and unity in every ASEAN-led mechanism, Vietnam has been very active in consolidating linkages of ASEAN's members, especially between Vietnam and ASEAN's latecomers, namely Cambodia and Laos. Besides support and joint activities on a bilateral basis, the three countries, with the rotating chairs, regularly intensify trilateral cooperation in different areas. In 1999, a plan for the Cambodia-Laos-Vietnam Development Triangle Area was established. In 2017, the three countries signed a trilateral cooperation programme at the third Front Presidium Conference of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. Vietnam's viewpoint regarding regional peace was echoed in the pledge made by the three front organisations as they committed to contributing to building a people-centred ASEAN community, forging a friendship and mutual understanding among countries for regional and global peace, and addressing disputes through peaceful means.

Conclusion

Rising from the ashes of war, Vietnam has revived itself and is now on a path to economic prosperity and greater international recognition. For decades, the country has been sparing no effort to contribute to regional peace. By upholding a peace-oriented foreign policy, joining and becoming an active member of ASEAN, showing constant support for resolving disputes by peaceful means, and advocating ASEAN's unity, Vietnam has played an important role in SEA regionalism. Since Hanoi recognises that it is in its interest to contribute to international peace and security, undoubtedly, Vietnam will demonstrate its stronger commitment to regional peace.

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