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## ***Vietnam's Foreign Policy and the Greater Mekong Subregion***

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## **Abstract**

The paper attempts to shed light on Vietnam's foreign policy design towards China as it translates into subregional economic cooperation schemes in the Mekong Basin, most importantly the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS). The GMS is one of the growth areas, which emerged throughout ASEAN after the end of the Cold War, encompassing China's Yunnan province, Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam. The present paper approaches an evaluation of the effectiveness of Vietnam's foreign policy approach taken in 1991 in order to prevent dependence on China as Vietnam's main foreign policy concern. As a result, Vietnam has participated in multifarious subregional cooperation schemes in order to enhance importance and leverage in political and economic world affairs vis-à-vis China.

Relevant for the realization of Vietnam's goals is the robustness and effectiveness of these cooperation schemes themselves. In its current state of development, Mekong cooperation is very informal without major structures or relevant economic and political cohesiveness. Region-wide stable regime formation cannot be anticipated given the differences in political and economic development and the widespread mutual distrust among the Southeast Asian GMS members and suspicion towards China, an indispensable country to make the GMS a worthwhile long-term undertaking. However, stable regimes are essential to effectively address Vietnam's security concerns, the lack of which forces Vietnam to look out for the US as major – albeit unlikely – ally to balance against China. The emerging task is a tightrope walk between the US and China, countries that in the eyes of the Vietnamese leadership are both central to secure Vietnam's economic, political and diplomatic independence.

# **Vietnam's Foreign Policy and the Greater Mekong Subregion\***

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## **Introduction**

In May 1988, forced by the global collapse of communism and Gorbachev's reform programme, Vietnam put forward a new foreign policy approach: an omni-directional foreign policy of multilateralizing and diversifying foreign relations in order to cope with the new situation and avoid a renewed dependence in foreign and economic affairs (formerly on the USSR, now referring to China as the main foreign policy concern).<sup>1</sup> This new foreign policy approach was developed alongside a concept of internationalising the economy. Both approaches have materialized not only in Vietnam's engagement in regional organizations (ASEAN, ARF), but also in a multitude of subregional cooperation schemes in the Mekong Basin – most importantly the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) and the Mekong River Commission (MRC).

The theoretical framework used for analyzing Vietnam's operation in the Mekong Basin is regime theory. Regime theory is of importance to the GMS since subregional cooperation in Southeast Asia often does not establish strong physical organisations (Dosch, 1997, 65). I will argue in this study that the concept of soft regionalism created by ASEAN and transferred to APEC has also been moved to the GMS. By doing so, Southeast Asian cooperation schemes, including those that go beyond the scope of Southeast Asia as APEC does, are able to maintain complementarity with each other and embody the particular kind of cooperation that allows for economic adjustments of member countries at different speed. While neither realist nor neoliberal institutional paradigms alone can explain GMS cooperation, the moulding of both theories into the regime approach offers a means of examining the validity of the concept for the GMS. The very usefulness of the regime approach for Mekong cooperation is its

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<sup>1</sup> At the 7<sup>th</sup> Party Congress in June 1991, the foreign policy was revised and renamed to one of "making friends with all countries."

flexible definition of regimes. The recent character of Mekong cooperation can thus prove a testing ground for the existence or emergence of regimes and shed light on both the character of Mekong cooperation and the future of it. The paper focuses on Vietnam-China relations and attempts to shed light on the successfulness of Vietnam's foreign policy strategy as it translates into subregional economic integration schemes in the Mekong region.

### **International regimes: definitions and categorizations**

The increasing trade flows in the Mekong area since the vanishing of the artificially imposed Cold War structure meant return to normality – the re-opening of cross-border trade in the 1990s, in particular between China and Vietnam, provides a case in point: official trade at the Hekou/Lao Cai port of the Red River officially re-opened on 18 May 1993 after 14 years of blockade (FBIS, 18 May 1993, 14-15). Earlier that year, from 27 February to 10 May 1993, China, Laos, Thailand and Myanmar jointly surveyed the Mekong River starting from Simao in order to collect data for developing the river into a shipping route and discuss the possibilities of cooperation in a follow-up meeting in Bangkok (FBIS, 18 May 1993, 15). Border trade between Myanmar and Yunnan had already been officially re-opened in 1988.

The emergence of subregional schemes was itself a “manifestation of the intensified intraregional investment flows and the accompanying trade flows in the Asia-Pacific region” (Chia and Lee, 1993, 226). As Nguyen Than Duc<sup>2</sup> (2002, 4-5) emphasizes, trade relations between China and Vietnam proceed dynamically along the shared border. This is highlighted by the opening of railways, roads, and seaports and the reduction of non-tariff and tariff barriers. Vietnam has also put forward the idea to build the ‘open economic zone’ in localities close to the border, “but so far the outcome has not been clearly reported”.

Increasing trade flows reach a point when they need to be governed. Regime theorists have provided the term of international regimes. Regimes can exist where unilateral action in the anarchic self-help system produces Pareto deficient, sub-optimal outcomes.<sup>3</sup> International regimes can be differentiated by their effectiveness and robustness (Hasenclever, Mayer and

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<sup>2</sup> Please be aware that Vietnamese names in the text follow the Vietnamese convention (first name last) while Vietnamese names in the bibliography follow the Western convention (first name first). This remark is important to distinguish the four authors of the surname Nguyen appearing in the text and in the bibliography. It is thus: Nguyen Than Duc ? Duc Than Nguyen, Nguyen Duy Quy ? Quy Duy Nguyen, Nguyen Manh Cam ? Cam Manh Nguyen, Nguyen Vu Tung ? Tung Vu Nguyen.

<sup>3</sup> For the debate see e.g. Keohane (1984) and the edited volumes Krasner (1983) and Rittberger (1995).

Rittberger, 1997, 2). Effectiveness of a regime refers to the “extent that its members abide by its norms and rules” (i.e. “regime strength”) and to the “extent that it achieves certain objectives and fulfils certain purposes.” Robustness (or resilience) of a regime “refers to the ‘staying power’ of international institutions in the face of exogenous challenges and to the extent to which prior institutional choices constrain collective decisions and behaviour in later periods” (Hasenclever, Mayer and Rittberger, 1997, 2; see also Hasenclever, Mayer and Rittberger, 1996). These two dimensions of a regime are “conceptually independent” but “may be correlated empirically”; therefore, in the face of regime change (which exhibits a regime lacking resilience), “at least in principle [...] a regime may turn out brittle, even though it continues to exhibit a high degree of effectiveness: compliance with the new norms and rules may be just as high as it was with the previous ones” (Hasenclever, Mayer and Rittberger, 1997, 2-3).

Keohane points out that international regimes have to fulfil the following functions: they should

1. produce a set of consistent and stable expectations,
2. lower transactions costs of cooperation, and
3. make information mutually available, hence producing transparency and predictable patterns of behaviour.

The gain the advantage of a durable long-term cooperation as opposed to the uncertainty of ad hoc cooperation, states must pursue a common goal and expect that the members of a regime adhere to the rules (Keohane, 1984, 152-167).

In direct adoption of Krasner’s consensus definition (Krasner, 1983, 2) Müller argued for security regimes, that

[s]ecurity regimes are systems of principles, norms, rules, and procedures regulating certain aspects of security relationships between states. A regime exists when all four elements can be identified and when the regime controls enough variables in a given issue area to affect (if obeyed) parties’ behaviour by

channelling or terminating unilateral self-help<sup>4</sup> with regard to the regulated variables (Müller, 1995, 361).

Levy, Young and Zürn have provided a useful categorization of international regimes: a regime includes two dimensions, of which one is “the degree of formality of the rules” and the other “the degree to which the expectations of actors converge.” The combination of both dimensions results in four categories of international regimes:

- no regime: no formal agreements and no expectation that rules will be adhered to;
- tacit regime: no formal rules, but expectation that the informal rules will be adhered to;
- dead-letter regime: formal rules, but no expectation that they will be adhered to;
- full-blown regime: formal rules and high expectation that they will be adhered to (Levy, Young and Zürn, 1995).

It is important to notice that regimes deal with specific issue-areas only. Müller made this point for security regimes: “The ‘security regime’ debate has suffered from the mistaken assumption that such regimes must cover the entire area of security” instead of the sub-areas only (Müller, 1995, 361).

Regimes must also be distinguished from international organizations. Otto has provided a clear distinction between both: Regimes are institutions “since they form stable patterns of behaviour on the basis of prescriptions and proscriptions. Yet, whereas regimes are the institutional framework of action guiding rules, formal organizations are corporate actors. Hence, organizations can engage in goal-oriented activities whereas regimes are not actors in international relations.” International organizations are “physical entities possessing offices, personnel, equipment, budgets and so forth.”<sup>5</sup> Regimes might be embedded in international organizations or can exist without such a one. For instance, the WTO is an international organization while its rules and procedures establish the trade regime. NATO is an international organization based on a security regime (the NATO treaty). Both organizations “can engage in goal oriented activities, for example through their secretary generals. However, they are only the “keeper” of regimes and cannot undertake sovereign action on

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<sup>4</sup> For the idea of the international system being a self-help system see Waltz, 1979.

<sup>5</sup> Quoted from Young, Oran R. (1986), “International Regimes: Towards a New Theory of Institutions,” in *World Politics*, Vol. 39, No. 1 (October), pp. 104-122 (p. 108).

their own account.” The Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) is an example for a regime existing without a formal organization structure and without any actors. Regimes focus on a particular issue-area whereas international organizations handle a set of goals (Otto, 2000, 45-46).

### **Water cooperation, security and international regimes**

Water cooperation as part of security policy has been the target of regime theoreticians. Subregional cooperation in the Mekong region has been associated with bringing peace to a region through confidence-building (Black, 1969). And water cooperation, as well as the use of natural resources in general, has been recognized as being important for international relations in general, and regime theory in particular. The GMS – although not a cooperation with a mandate confined to the use of water resources (as is the Mekong River Commission), is nevertheless based on water as the central source of electricity, infrastructure and transportation development. Water is hence a key ingredient of the region’s economic development. As Berman pointed out, at stake are Vietnam’s efforts to raise productivity levels in the Mekong Delta in a sustainable way:

The fact that so many hopes for major development schemes are placed on the availability of water from the Lancang (Mekong) is both a cause for anxiety and a motivation to cooperate among the six GMS countries. Only China, controlling 50% of the river’s headwaters, remains in a position to develop the river unilaterally (Berman, 1998, Chapter II.C.1.).

Construction of dams, hydroelectric power plants and clearing of the Mekong affect the quality and the amount of water flowing through the lower Mekong countries. Haftendorn makes clear that “freshwater resources are prone to international conflict if they cross national boundaries,” (Haftendorn, 2000, 51. The following paragraph see Haftendorn, 2000, 51-52 and 62-68) whereby the conflicts are of different nature and fall into four categories: (1) “conflict through use” (for instance, construction of power stations e.g. producing polluted waste water, dams for electrical and irrigation purposes); (2) “conflict through pollution” affecting the water quality; (3) “relative distribution conflict”, if use of an abundant source is contested; (4) “absolute distribution conflict”, if there is not enough water to serve all the needs of the riparian countries. Haftendorn points out two ways to solve conflicts:

Firstly, it is possible to change a situation where there is no cooperative solution possible into a dilemma situation where a (costly) solution is possible. The situation without a possible

solution is the so-called rambo situation: “All running water conflicts are asymmetrical conflicts [...] whereby there is a state or states that control a river’s source or upper flow, placing the lower riparian states at a disadvantage.” The upper states control the quality and quantity of the water flow. This could change to a puzzle situation “in which the upper-lying state or states relinquish their position of power and come to a suitable agreement with the lower-lying riparian states [...] in return for specific rewards or political and material side payments.” This changes the “default condition” where a lack of cooperation leaves all parties worse off. The precondition of changing a rambo situation into a dilemma situation in which it is the desire of all states to cooperate in order to solve an unsatisfying situation, is the linkage to other problems (global or regional) in the bilateral or multilateral relationship, i.e. the conditions in which the actual conflict is embedded. Wherever there are, for instance, military, security or ethnic problems involved, the rambo situation could change into a dilemma situation in which it is also the desire of the powerful state to come to a cooperative solution of the water conflict. Helpful for cooperation are the following situations:

- the level of interaction and the quality of the bilateral or multilateral relationships;
- arbitration, mediation, intervention;
- a change in the international or domestic framework (such as the East-West conflict);
- improvement of information exchange and confidence building.

Secondly, the establishment of international institutions can be another solution to previously unsolvable conflicts. General water agreements of international (UNO) and regional (EU/EC) organizations, such as the 1992 Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes (Helsinki Convention) and the 1997 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Non-Navigational Uses of International Watercourses, have been less successful, due to their “high degree of generality and non-binding global norms” (the only exception of a general agreement over water is the Final Act of the Vienna Congress of 1815). Moreover,

[e]ach general regulation needs to be feasible or applicable to a number of differing conflict scenarios, as well as having to embody the general preferences of the participating states. The various conventions embody principles that act more as orientation markers. However, these are open to interpretation in the future and can serve as concrete guidelines.



Specific conventions, however, have been considerably more successful and “many [...] have led to regime building; that is, by embodying norms, principles and procedural roles, they have provided the means to build trust among states and to encourage the development of friendly relations.” Water commissions ‘have managed to keep problematic water issues on the agenda, to assist with and improve the transfer of information among members and to offer expert advice. In this manner they have eased the achievement of settlements.’ Sometimes, water regimes are a side product of economic integration processes, including consideration about the “shadow of the future”<sup>6</sup>. Also, regimes can occur as modelled on other successful multilateral or bilateral settlements. On the whole, the role of international institutions “has been most significant in the case of regional water regimes and as reactions to a specific conflict, whereby their integrative context motivated their continued existence. This in turn served to ease the settlement of new conflicts” (Haftendorn, 2000, 52 + 62-68).

The next sections lay out Vietnam’s China-policy and explore its manifestation in Mekong Basin cooperation schemes.

### **Vietnam’s China-policy**

The key ingredient of Vietnam’s integration effort is a new foreign policy approach developed with the economic reform programme of *doi moi*. During the Cold War, Vietnam viewed ASEAN largely as an organization used by the US for its Cold War aims. The proposal of “genuine independence” of 1976 pointed in this direction: for Vietnam, it meant a criticism of ASEAN’s dependence on European ex-colonial powers and the US superpower, notably regarding the defense agreements of individual ASEAN states with Europe and the United States (e.g. Luu, 2000, 246). ASEAN, however, received Hanoi’s proposal as an attempt to “launch[...] a ‘just struggle’ against ASEAN,” (Haacke, 2003, 66) presumably by enforcing communist insurgency movements in Southeast Asian countries, generously sponsored by China. Moreover, “the perception by Hanoi of an ideological, and perhaps, military superiority, which led to a competition over state identities, and preferences over a hierarchical vision of a regional order favourable to Vietnam, had prevented Vietnam-ASEAN co-operation” (Nguyen Vu Tung, 2002, 113).

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<sup>6</sup> For the concept of the “shadow of the future” see Axelrod and Keohane, 1985, 227.

The downfall of communist ideology from the mid-1980s onwards forced Vietnam to leave alliance-building behind and to embark on an omni-directional foreign policy in order to 1)make up for the loss of capital and goods supplied by the Soviet camp and 2)escape the now virtually complete political and economic isolation. The key ingredient of the success of doi moi is to open the economy and attract FDI, and a normalization of diplomatic relations (Gates, 1995). Economic growth, in turn, is seen as a way to provide Vietnam with national security, since Vietnam is regarded as living “in a region surrounded by tigers and a dragon; the continued backwardness of the country is the biggest security threat to the nation” (Goodman, 1996, 596). In other words: a poor country is not a strong country (Hoang, 1994).

Relevant for Vietnam’s relations to China are 1)the view that China is a socialist state at a time of international and domestic communist decline – “comrades plus brothers” – and a model for economic and political reform and 2)a legacy of mistrust stemming from historical experience of Chinese domination, current hostilities and unsolved border disputes. Vietnam’s China perception hence appears somewhat Janus-faced. The omni-directional foreign policy approach is designed to meet this challenge.<sup>7</sup>

According to Nguyen Than Duc (2002, 4), Vietnam pursues a threefold purpose of subregional cooperation in foreign policy: “a diversification of foreign relations in a new global environment; improving relations with former adversaries (especially China); demonstrating trustworthiness in international relations in order to reach long-term goals such as WTO membership”. International cooperation, and especially subregional cooperation, is seen as a vehicle to realize the goals, as political and economic relations with China started a process of normalization in the early 1990s. It is hoped that actions of China and Vietnam can be coordinated in subregional forums, the more so since China is already a dialogue partner of ASEAN and a member of the ARF. The resulting hope of Vietnam is to further develop ties with China in Vietnam’s favour, while there is also fear, at the same time, of becoming increasingly dependent on China the more domestic markets are opened and the more China can succeed in realizing its aims regarding 1)the use of the Mekong’s upstream waters (e.g. for irrigation and energy purposes) and 2)the opening of new markets in Southeast Asia. In economic terms, this could mean the development of an even greater economic force that cannot be challenged by the economies of the Mekong countries.

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<sup>7</sup> The historical ties, however, were also invoked for positive purposes in times of crisis when Vietnam asked China for help, e.g. at the time of French inroads into Vietnamese territory (Harrison, 2001, 74).

The security issue is thus in the first place raised vis-à-vis China. At the same time, however, good neighbourly relations with ASEAN are part of the Chinese strategy of creating a peaceful environment to carry out its domestic economic reforms without disturbances (White Paper, October 2000, Foreword), turning economic power into more regional and global leverage (You and Jia, 1998, 128), and to gain influence in the region by contrasting its behaviour as a benign power to that of the US, “which typically sees political and economic reform as a prerequisite for amicable relations” (Mitchell and Vatikiotis, 2000, 22). On the other hand, GMS cooperation is a way to develop Yunnan’s economy on a long-term basis. It is thus a double strategy of instrumentalizing subregional cooperation for foreign and security policy purposes and the genuine willingness to establish long-term cooperative ties with the Mekong countries that Vietnam has to face.

Faced with China’s double strategy, Hanoi’s accession to ASEAN can hence be seen as fulfilling a two-fold purpose: not only was that move an attempt by ASEAN to pull Vietnam out of the Chinese orbit; but it was also an attempt by Hanoi to “balance against China”, as Vietnam believes that ASEAN, although an informal alliance, is regarded by China as too important an organization that a confrontational policy against it or its member countries would risk Beijing’s domestic reform programme. Vietnam hopes that “there would be a ‘trans-ASEAN’ cost that would moderate China’s Vietnam policy.”<sup>8</sup> (Abuza, 2002, 139, see also Rüländ, 1999, 340-341)<sup>9</sup>. While it stated, that an enlarged ASEAN is not directed against China, Hanoi yet seeks to draw ASEAN into a unified position concerning the Spratly problem (Sidel, 1998, 89), a strategy that is less successful than Vietnam might wish.<sup>10</sup>

However, Vietnam, having found some shelter within ASEAN, employs a strategy that focuses on extending the dialogue with China, and thereby trying to strengthen the mutual economic ties<sup>11</sup>; being economically attractive to other countries as well, such as Russia and Japan, increases Hanoi’s international stand and economic strength and, as a consequence, could provide it with the ability to assert itself politically vis-à-vis its big neighbour (Will,

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<sup>8</sup> Quoted from Nhan Dan, 29 July 1994, “Interview with Deputy Foreign Minister Le Mai,” Vietnam Economic Times (June 1995), pp. 12-13.

<sup>9</sup> ASEAN views the extension of its “territory” as a buffer zone against extended Chinese influence in Southeast Asia (Rüländ, 1999, 341-342).

<sup>10</sup> For the different perceptions of China within ASEAN see Rüländ, 1999, 351-346

<sup>11</sup> For statistical data on economic relations see Nguyen Duy Quy, 2000, 14. The data used by Nguyen Duy Quy was published by Nguyen The Tang, Director of the Center for Researches on China.

1999, 305-306). Thus, ASEAN membership is of great importance for Vietnam for economic, security, and political reasons. Other Vietnamese steps to strengthen ties in the field of foreign and security policy with countries apart from China are limited, due to both old enemy conceptions towards the USA, and the difficult tight-rope walk concerning China. Hanoi's general foreign policy strategy is "making friends with all countries" and "diversifying foreign relations" (Thayer, 2001, 186) in order to widen the diplomatic scope on the international stage and cope with China's highly flexible foreign policy (Will, 1999, 307).

Recent events confirm Vietnam's balancing act – showing at the same time the tightrope walk Vietnam is exercising between the Washington and Beijing: a cosier atmosphere with the United States could arise through the following events, among them a deepening of bilateral military contacts:

- Vietnam's agreement to allow a search of classified government files on US POWs held after the war (Reuters, 31 October 2003);
- Defense Minister Pham Van Tra's unprecedented US visit from 10-12 November 2003 to meet Donald Rumsfeld and Colin Powell, the first visit of a Vietnamese Defense Minister to the US since the end of the Vietnam War. This visit also showed that the US is willing to continue to play a major role in the Asia-Pacific. It is noteworthy, however, that Rumsfeld met the Chinese Defense Minister Cao Gangchuan on 28 October in Washington, shortly before Tra's arrival (Reuters, 4 November 2003); also, interestingly, Vietnam wished the visit to be a low-key affair, while at the same time US defense analysts said that improved relations with the US may offer Vietnam a strategic counterweight to balance China's growing regional influence (Will Dunham for Reuters, 10 November 2003);
- Vietnam and the US's agreement of October 2003 to allow direct flights between the countries to boost economic relations (Reuters, 4 November 2003);
- a three-day meeting at the beginning of November as the "fruit" of last year's landmark deal of March 2002 to discuss solutions of dioxin contamination through the use of Agent Orange. Tra made clear that Vietnam does not seek compensation "but will urge America to take responsibility" for the people affected (Reuters, 5 November 2003). This careful approach parallels Prime Minister Khai's earlier statement to raise the issue in a way that is acceptable to both sides and does not harm the future relations between both countries (Ihlau and Kremb, 2002b (Interview with Vietnam's Prime Minister), 138);

- a visit by the American navy frigate USS Vandegrift sailing up the Saigon river from Vung Tau and docking at Saigon Port on 19-22 November 2003. The ship was greeted by a low-key delegation led by Nguyen Duc Hung, assistant to Vietnam's foreign minister (Reuters, 14 November 2003 and Christina Toh-Pantin for Reuters, 19 + 20 November 2003);
- bilateral trade: Vietnam's exports surged 128 percent over 2001 to \$2.39 billion, imports from the US rose 26 percent. Two-way trade totalled \$3.4 billion during the first eight months of 2003 (Reuters, 14 November 2003 and Christina Toh-Pantin for Reuters, 15 November 2003);
- a recent visit of Foreign Minister Nguyen Dy Nien with the investment minister and trade minister to the US (Christina Toh-Pantin for Reuters, 15 November 2003);
- Vietnam's participation in the Cobra Gold military exercises in May 2003 of Thai, US and Singapore troops in Thailand. According to Robert Karniol of Jane's Defense Weekly, even though Vietnam had been invited several times, they accepted only after China had done so (quoted in Jane Macartney for Reuters, 18 November 2003).

These developments notwithstanding, Karniol believes that the actions are largely symbolic. In particular, they do not include a move by Washington to "lift economic sanction on military-related equipment that prevent the sale of equipment deemed too sensitive to share – and which apply to China too" (Jane Macartney for Reuters, 18 November 2003). Also, the current conflict over religious and human rights issues show that there is considerable potential for conflict and strings attached by the US in the relations to Vietnam.

Under General Secretary Le Kha Phieu<sup>12</sup>, the carefully elaborated omni-directional foreign policy, including the China-balancing element, was temporarily in favour of an explicit pro-China policy. As a result,

Phieu came under attack for this, because most Vietnamese policymakers do not believe that China will ever reward Vietnam for its quiescence and deference. In their eyes, for Beijing, such behaviour is simply expected of a former vassal state. Yet, Phieu went out of his way to defer to China's concerns and, to many in the

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<sup>12</sup> elected at the 4<sup>th</sup> Plenum of the 8<sup>th</sup> Central Committee, 26 December 1997, voted out of office at the 9<sup>th</sup> Party Congress in April 2001.

government, to such a degree that Vietnam's sovereignty seemed to be in doubt (Abuza, 2002, 139).

In the next section, the GMS will shortly be introduced in order to proceed to an analysis of Vietnam's operations in the GMS.

### **The Greater Mekong Subregion: nature and institutions**

The GMS was established in 1992 on the initiative of the ADB. The GMS's overall benefits can be described as adjusting to the globalized characterization of and the shrinking isolationism in each individual country; it also is supposed to foster peace, stability and cooperation within the region. According to former Foreign Minister Nguyen Manh Cam (2002, 22-24), the ASEAN membership of Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia and Myanmar and Thailand is the basis for a potential future success of the Greater Mekong Subregion. He, however, does not state how this can be possible. Often, it seems that assumptions such as these remain phrases. ASEAN seems to react but not to shape the integration processes in the growth areas: the Basic Framework of ASEAN-Mekong Basin Development Cooperation (ASEAN-MB<sup>13</sup>) was not founded until 1996, seven years after the establishment of SIJORI, four years after the GMS and one year after the MRC.

The nature of GMS cooperation is one that can be found across Southeast Asia as a guiding principle for cooperation: it "has largely been informal and guided only by a set of principles and institutional arrangements."<sup>14</sup> Hence, ASEAN's invention of a "soft regionalism" with the rejection of legally-binding obligations and formal treaties by countries of historical, economic and cultural diversity and the emphasis on "socializing influences," and APEC's "open regionalism" (modelled on ASEAN procedures) without discrimination against outsiders, both of which in 1989 found a new home in APEC and the ARF (Ravenhill, 1998, 260-266; Krongkaew, 2000, 38-41), have now also been transferred to the Mekong Basin. The principles of the ASEAN way concerning conflict settlement can be found in the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation of 1976 and the amending protocol of 1987. The three decisive points of the treaty are the principles of (1) non-interference, (2) peaceful settlement of

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<sup>13</sup> ASEAN-MB "complements cooperation initiatives currently undertaken by the Mekong River Commission, donor countries and other multilateral agencies" and "mobilises the participation of the private sector" (ASEAN, 1996).

<sup>14</sup> ADB, *The GMS Program: History and Background*, located on the Internet at [www.adb.org/GMS/gmsprog10.asp](http://www.adb.org/GMS/gmsprog10.asp).

disputes through “friendly negotiations” and in the case of failure through “good offices, mediation, inquiry or conciliation” of the high council if the parties involved “agree to their application” and (3) the refrainment of the threat or use of force (ASEAN, 1976, articles 2, 13-16). The amending protocol of 1987 made accession of states outside Southeast Asia to the 1976 treaty possible, thereby laying down the concept of open regionalism (ASEAN, 1987, articles 1-2. Cooperation with countries and organizations outside Southeast Asian was already written down in the original 1976 treaty: ASEAN, 1976, article 6). The Kuching Consensus of 1990 transferred ASEAN’s soft regionalism to APEC, since Kuching formed the condition posed by ASEAN members to become members of APEC. An institutional linkage of the GMS with ASEAN and APEC as envisaged, will most certainly transfer ASEAN procedures to the GMS. According to Sakai, one major challenge the GMS will face in order not to be overrun by globalization, is the need to “strengthen the institutional capacity of the GMS countries to manage subregional economic cooperation truly as their ‘own’ program and make progress in a sustained manner” (Sakai, 2000, 18).<sup>15</sup> In positive terms, the most successful achievement of Southeast Asian soft regionalism to date is the inclusion of China in ASEAN and ARF.

By using the example of the East-West Corridor, Sakai claims that cooperation under GMS aegis is of a much more substantial efficiency than cooperation within ASEAN (Sakai, 2000, 19):

- a project-oriented approach in GMS brings about “immediate tangible results rather than setting up rules or agreements;”
- “when rules or agreements are needed, the starting point is again a project,” thus showing an immediate result and usage for a new rule;
- due to the splitting of projects among various sets of member countries, consensus of all six GMS countries is not needed. Implementation of projects “can be initiated by two or more interested countries,” while “the overall strategy and prioritisation of projects are discussed by the six countries in ministerial and sectoral forums.”

Indeed, the possibility for the GMS countries to choose membership and participation in the various projects, and a down-to-earth project-oriented approach, seem to offer a suitable and

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<sup>15</sup> In the wake of the badly handled Asian Crisis, the ASEAN way has been put under criticism from Southeast Asian scholars and politicians, indicating that the time is ripe for reform to strengthen the organization (for more details see Dosch, 2003, also Dosch, 2002).

decisive alternative to the principle of ASEAN, APEC and the ARF. By this, however, the GMS faces the same problems as does ASEAN cooperation. And even though it is thought to having found a tool to circumvent them, in reality the GMS is split up in various sections of activity which might be difficult to coordinate. This fact also lays bare the very difficulty to accommodate the six countries concerned, their strategies and interests. For the future and for analytical purposes, it thus seems appropriate to subdivide the GMS, as it is anyway already sidelined/bypassed most importantly by the Mekong River Commission (Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam), the Golden Quadrangle (China, Thailand, Myanmar, Laos) and the Japanese-sponsored Forum for the Comprehensive Development of Indochina (Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam). The division of ASEAN into growth triangles is repeated in the division of the GMS into further subregions. Medhi Krongkaew used the plural to describe the GMS as “growth areas” (Krongkaew, 2000, 49). Whether it was done by accident, or on purpose, remains to be questioned. Either way, it shows the difficult nature of cooperation in the Greater Mekong Subregion.

### **The role of the ADB**

A special role in the GMS’s negotiation processes has been allocated to the ADB. This multilateral institution works as a catalyst in order to “facilitate the consultative process in forming the GT” (Tongzon, 1998, 94). The ADB has initiated the GMS programme in 1992. According to its charter, a crucial function is “to utilize the resources at its disposal for financing development of the developing member countries in the region, giving priority to those regional, sub-regional as well as national projects and programmes which will contribute most effectively to the harmonious growth of the region as a whole” (ADB, 1966, article 2).

The ADB has drawn up a programme to help Vietnam with integrating the economy into the subregion:

In terms of transport and infrastructure development, the ADB gives priority to the upgrading of transport corridors that are simultaneously beneficial to subregional linkages. Particular targets in this respect are the road between Hanoi and Lang Son on the Vietnamese-Chinese border, the Ho Chi Minh City-Phnom Penh-Bangkok Highway, and the East-West-Corridor connecting Laos, northeast Thailand and central Vietnam. The latter would also open a hinterland for central Vietnam. Another target is the road and rail route from Hanoi to Lao Cai. In terms of energy production, cross-border power exchange is seen as having a potential



for development, as well as a subregional gas pipeline network. Private sector interest can be found in the development of coal-fired power plants in northern Vietnam, which would serve both the domestic market and could export power to China. Other areas where the ADB sees development potential with effects for the GMS as a whole are human development (especially with regards to the health sector, malaria and AIDS) and the environment<sup>16</sup> (ADB, 1995, 44).

At first glance, the intermediary role of the non-political ADB is an important element to foster successful economic cooperation. But, again, ADB-facilitated projects are not necessarily projects whose implementation is envisaged by all of the six countries. Hence, while projects are discussed by all of the GMS members, the implementation is down to individual member countries on a bilateral, trilateral etc. basis (similar to APEC's concerted unilateralism) without legal provisions. The GMS thus appears to develop into a discussion forum where rapprochement and confidence-building is being pursued, strategies are laid out and visions are elaborated. But GMS could develop into an umbrella organisation for all kinds of cooperation schemes for which it provides the focal point for donor countries and organizations.

### **Vietnam's engagement in the Mekong region's groupings**

In order to match its approaches in foreign affairs and economic relations, Vietnam has engaged in a plethora of multilateral arrangements. This is possible through a dense network of schemes and projects in the GMS. Vietnam's interests in the GMS are comprehensively summarized by Nguyen Than Duc: the benefits of the Mekong Delta for rice production, navigation, irrigation, fishing, hydro-electric power and tourism, give Vietnam an almost natural interest in the well-being of the Mekong. The ecological issues concerning Vietnam are deforestation, erosion, salt intrusion due to declining water resources, pollution and a loss of biodiversity. Floods are increasingly affecting agricultural development. To tackle the issue, Vietnam needs the cooperation of the upper Mekong countries and especially China. The reduction of water resources due to dams, hydroelectric power plants and irrigation of the

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<sup>16</sup> RETA 5535: Promoting Subregional Cooperation Among Cambodia, People's Republic of China, Lao PDR, Myanmar, Thailand and Viet Nam for \$4.0 million, approved on 10 July 1993. RETA 5649: Greater Mekong Subregion Infrastructure Improvement: Ho Chi Minh to Phnom Penh Highway, for \$3.0 million, approved on 9 November 1995. RETA 5566: Study of the Lao-Thailand-Viet Nam-East-West Transport Corridor for \$1.0 million, approved on 18 July 1994. This TA is financed by France with the Bank acting as the Executing Agency.

upper Mekong countries, is not only becoming increasingly difficult, but is already a major problem in Vietnam's relations to China and also raises the issue of future water conflicts. Agreement over the use of the water is difficult, the more so, since growing economic competition "could frustrate efforts to promote co-operation." Initiatives such as the East-West Corridor, the Forum for the Comprehensive Development of Indochina and the Opening Cross-Border were developed to avoid these problems. Also, it is hoped that subregional cooperation will diminish the differences in economic development among ASEAN member states. With ASEAN facing financial constraints, other resources from donors other than ASEAN shall be mobilized. It is hoped that subregional cooperation will fulfil this task and will even out economic differences (Nguyen Than Duc, 2002, 1-2. For the environmental issues and arising conflicts see also Osborne, 2000). Close coordination between China and Vietnam is especially important as is coordination among subregional countries to meet this challenge. Where it concerns water, cooperation is not often smooth. For Vietnam, Vietnam-China relations turn out as a major problem within GMS. As Leifer emphasized, "the practical problem of ensuring that upstream states engage in prior consultation with riparian partners before exploiting water has not been overcome" (Leifer, 1996, 171).

China's economic and political power position and its – from Vietnam's point of view – problematic strategy of 1)building strong ties with Southeast Asia and 2)using Southeast Asia as a large market and for a leading position produces some dependence of Vietnam on China. The differences over the East Sea, especially the use of Truong Sa (Spratly) and Hoang Sa (Paracel) islands and export competition in the international market, especially after China's accession to WTO, all pose problems. As a result,

[t]o avoid dependence on China, it is urgent for Vietnam to expand its economic potential. At the same time, Vietnam must diversify its international relations (not only with China and ASEAN), especially with three major economies: the U.S., the EU and Japan (Nguyen Than Duc, 2002, 4-5).

Two goals can be thus identified for Vietnam vis-à-vis China: economic competitiveness and diplomatic diversification.

The idea of taming China by engaging it might not be working. Although military conflicts could be avoided if both sides agree that armed clashes are counterproductive for their

respective goals, the two summits in Phnom Penh in November 2002 – the 8<sup>th</sup> ASEAN summit and the 1<sup>st</sup> GMS summit – show that China is seeking to keep a free hand. The series of agreements signed at the ASEAN summit included a *Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea*.<sup>17</sup> However, as Wain observed, this vague declaration represents a “classic political deal designed to end an embarrassing stand-off” (Wain, 2002, 26), since China did not accede to ASEAN wishes and could avoid the conclusion of a proper multilateral Code of Conduct for the South China Sea. While China still accepts a general Code of Conduct as the ultimate goal to replace the newly concluded political declaration, Beijing built “its own loophole” for such as code, “requiring consensus to work toward such as code, which presumably will let Beijing avoid that commitment if it so desires.” According to a senior Southeast Asian official, “Asean and China went out of their way to compromise on the agreement in an effort to promote closer relations that are visibly obstacle-free – so aid, trade and investment can flow more freely” (quoted in Wain, 2002, 26; for the agreement see ASEAN, 2002). Similarly, the GMS summit went the same way during discussion over the irrigation issue which divides China and the lower Mekong countries. ASEAN’s soft regionalism has won.

It has to be noted, however, that for the first time China has abandoned its strict stance on bilateral discussion and dealt with ASEAN as a region in tackling the problem. If this can be regarded a major strategic shift in the future remains as yet to be questioned.

## **Conclusion**

ASEAN and AFTA are viewed in a recent research by Vietnamese scholars as a starting point for a future Vietnamese success in global economic competition (Le, 2003). This view of ASEAN as a stepping stone towards APEC is shared by Haacke (2003, 69). Taking into account the connection between economic growth and national security, that could suggest that ASEAN and AFTA – as they are only a stepping stone towards full-fledged growth – that they are also a stepping stone only towards full-fledged national security.

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<sup>17</sup> The other agreements being a framework agreement to establish a China-ASEAN Free Trade Area by 2010, a declaration on non-traditional security issues such as terrorism, cyber crime and people-smuggling, an agricultural pact with the ASEAN secretariat and China’s announcement of new aid for Cambodia while writing off Cambodia’s debts.

The prospects of stable regime formation among all of the GMS member countries have to be seen in a rather pessimistic light. A conflict-free and trustful cooperation appears doubtful not only in the light of China-Vietnam relations. A recent decline in the relations between Thailand and Cambodia suggests a rather unenthusiastic attitude. Even though Cambodia and Vietnam have recently agreed to further open the border in order to boost the economy, and the plan of Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Myanmar to establish an economic cooperation between them (Bagan Declaration) “in which there will be no tax on material and products” (AKP News, 11 November 2003), the sudden outbreak of hostilities between Cambodia and Thailand on both sides show how easy violent regional conflicts can be brought about. Although regime formation is possible in economic areas, China is the main factor in whether or not the GMS can produce robust and stable regimes. This is however limited to the economic sphere and is unlikely to extent in the direction of security cooperation. Given a positive outcome, a stable and robust regime will not provide Vietnam with any backing against China, as China is too vital a factor in the relations between Southeast Asian individual states and the region as a whole that a united anti-China front would arise. Vietnam has to look beyond the region for more support – and orientates itself towards the United States. Also, the signing of the Bilateral Investment Treaty (*Agreement between Japan and the Socialist Republic of Viet Nam for the Liberalization, Promotion and Protection of Investment*) in Tokyo on 14 November 2003 has given an even larger role to Japan in the development of the Vietnamese economy. Japan is already Vietnam’s largest donor, a main trading partner and its third-largest foreign investor, after Singapore and Taiwan (Reuters, 14 November 2003). The recent events in the relations between the United States and Vietnam show that relations between the two become more and more cosy and might point to a distant point in time when the Vietnam War can be discussed in a more relaxed atmosphere on the side of Vietnam and the United States. While GMS, ASEAN and APEC provide stepping stones to Vietnam’s full resurgence as a global player (as a WTO member), they fulfil the aim to provide Vietnam with a rising economy and thus a resilient national security. However, taking into account the importance and political as well as economic domination of China in Southeast Asia, the United States could function as the only power to back Vietnam in conflicts with China. The GMS seems to function as an economic cooperation scheme that turns out toothless with regards to Vietnam’s wider security objectives. Soft regionalism shows, in particular in conflicting issues with China, that ASEAN and now also GMS cannot exert leverage if China does not want them to do so. The network of cooperation is dense, but at the same time loose, so that ASEAN and the GMS cannot (and will not) provide the

backing Vietnam hopes for. Faced with Beijing's aim to replace Washington in Southeast Asia and China's vital role to make GMS and MRC a worthwhile long-term undertaking, Vietnam remains trapped by the necessity to maintain good relations with both China and the United States for both economic and security reasons.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> A different approach, which I did not touch on for reasons of time and space, is the question of to what extent nationalism and hence territorial claims are driven by domestic factors as an element of élite struggle (see e.g. Deans, 2000). The approach could suggest to paint a somewhat less gloomy picture. In my view, however, it does not influence the overall foreign policy and security objectives of China and Vietnam as they seem to follow realpolitik concerns and are thus (largely) detached from ideological considerations.

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