



**Vietnam, Asian Integration and ASEAN's Role:
A New Zealand Perspective**

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To detect a New Zealand perspective on Vietnam's approach to integration in Asia, including its role in ASEAN-centred efforts, it is useful to consider what patterns and style of integration in Asia might be in New Zealand's long-term interests. But to do this we first need a sense of what would suit New Zealand best in terms of Asia's trajectory more generally and to which that integration could then contribute, not least because integration cannot be an end in itself but needs to be a means to some larger and higher end in regional affairs.

So that is the order this presentation will take: first, it will describe the characteristics of tomorrow's Asia which are in New Zealand's interests; second, it will give a sense of New Zealand perspectives on how, and what sort of, integration would best fit into that broader picture; and third, it will consider how New Zealand might like to see Vietnam play in bringing these first and second order events to fruition, including in the immediate future as Vietnam chairs ASEAN in 2010.

I: What Sort of Asia?

It is in New Zealand's interests for tomorrow's Asia to have three main characteristics:

- (1) A prosperous Asia whose economies continue to be major trading and investment partners for each other and for New Zealand. For the latter to happen this means an open trading regime in Asia rather than one where the growth and the connections are restricted to, for example, East Asian economies. It means a group of Asia-Pacific economies working together in recognition of their common economic interests.
- (2) A secure Asia characterised by two main types of stability and confidence (a) generally peaceful strategic relations between the major powers in Asia based on the amicable management of the changing distribution of power in the region

including the region's rising powers; the absence of excessive competition over armaments, energy, maritime resources and territory; and the absence of hegemonic impulses which can put at particular risk the interests of smaller and medium states including New Zealand and Vietnam (b) stable political relations within Asian countries who are able to manage processes of political change and transition peacefully and smoothly and whose systems of domestic governance have adequate coping capacity for the challenges which come from such short-term crises such as sudden financial shocks and longer term challenges such as those brought about by climate change

- (3) An Asia-Pacific where the rules of the game – the soft institutions – and any formal institutional arrangements are (a) the product of cooperation and negotiation rather than imposition (b) able to recognise the interests of the smaller as well as the larger powers, incorporating countries like New Zealand and Australia as well as those in the Asian core; (c) sensitive to the range of political systems in the region including countries like New Zealand with liberal democratic traditions and a strong commitment to global governance; and (d) able to support the economic and security interests discussed in the two preceding paragraphs.

II: What Sort of Integration in Asian and through ASEAN?

Deepening the processes of Asian integration is certainly beneficial to New Zealand as a general rule, and especially to the extent that it allows for New Zealand's interests in a prosperous and secure region to be realized. For that to occur, the region requires:

- (1) *open* integration of the sort which spans the Asian core and countries such as New Zealand and Australia. In this connection New Zealand's preference is for initiatives and forums which reflect this wider sense of region including the East Asian Summit and AFTA-CER discussions. There is also some reflection of this philosophy in the Trans-Pacific Partnership negotiations in which New Zealand is involved and Vietnam is an observer.
- (2) *fair* integration which does not benefit, and is not directed, by strong states seeking to dominate the process and dictate who should be involved, but which supports the interests of small and medium powers including those in ASEAN and Australasia. In this sense New Zealand has interests in ASEAN countries strengthening their role in wider Asian integration processes, and in cooperation between New Zealand, Australia and the members of ASEAN to a similar effect.
- (3) *robust* integration where the increasing openness of economies and polities to one another is not easily upset by occasional crises, downturns and disturbances, and is not hostage to the normal ups and downs in bilateral relations. In this sense New Zealand recognizes that existing processes and mechanisms, such as those centred around ASEAN, have had important roles to play in encouraging open and fair integration, and that these should be strengthened. But these may not remain quite as central in some efforts as the members of ASEAN have been expecting and hoping, including in efforts to manage the relations between the region's major powers.

III: What role for Vietnam?

Vietnam has an important role to play in efforts to develop integration in ASEAN and the wider Asia-Pacific. It is not only one of the largest Southeast Asian countries but is also

the most prominent and influential member of the CMLV group of countries (Cambodia, Myanmar, Laos and Vietnam), which needs to bring fresh impetus to ASEAN if the Association is to bring to the twenty-first century what it brought to Asia in the years following its establishment over 40 years ago. In terms of ASEAN's relations with the wider region, Vietnam has a particularly important contribution to make given its unique geographical position alongside China, Asia's fastest growing major power, and its expanding relations with the United States, India, and other major powers. Vietnam can thus play significant role in the determination of how Asian integration can occur to benefit the interests of the Asia-Pacific's smaller and medium powers as the distribution of power in Asia is transformed.

Vietnam's role, including as ASEAN's Co-Chair in 2010, also comes with significant responsibilities. The extent to which Vietnam and its Southeast Asian neighbours can maintain strong and effective relations with all the major powers simultaneously depends in part on their collaboration together as well as the particular policies they individually adopt towards the larger states. A sense of common purpose within ASEAN in approaching and engaging the major powers, while not an end in itself, could be an important element in the region's future security order. If individual ASEAN countries approach relations with major powers considerably more from the perspective of self-interest than common purpose, and especially if they use ASEAN as a vehicle to do so, this may be counterproductive to the sort of integration that suits regional stability. Finding a suitable point of convergence between self interest and common purpose is an important priority for Vietnam, especially this year when it holds the ASEAN Presidency.

Hopes for that stability might also be advanced if in the coming years those ASEAN countries with tensions in their relations with other ASEAN countries (which includes some of Vietnam's neighbours) can be encouraged to address these issues constructively. Further thought might be given during Vietnam's Presidency of ASEAN as to how member countries with difficult domestic political circumstances can address these issues through transparent processes which encourage political agreement, while at the same time giving due consideration to the ASEAN norm of non-interference.

As New Zealand and Australia work alongside their Southeast Asian trading and diplomatic partners, we need collectively to consider how we can promote our common interests in a region where our interests can sometimes be overlooked by the larger players. To the extent that it succeeds in becoming increasingly prosperous, secure and open, Vietnam can offer a voice that is needed as the Asia becomes more integrated as a region and at the same time ever more important in global affairs. From Wellington's perspective, a very valued part of that voice will be continuing support for New Zealand and Australia's involvement in the processes of Asian integration.

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