



## Viet Nam-New Zealand Track 1.5 Bilateral Dialogue Hanoi 9-10 June 2008

*This paper was presented at the inaugural bilateral dialogue in Hanoi. The  
New Zealand delegation was led by Asia:NZ*

### **Session V: Viet Nam-New Zealand Cooperation in multilateral institutions (ASEAN, East Asia and United Nations)**

**James Kember<sup>1</sup>**

**New Zealand Ambassador to Viet Nam**

---

New Zealand was one of the first UN member countries to voice public support for Viet Nam's bid for membership of the United Nations Security Council, a term that began in January this year. Should that have occasioned surprise or was it consistent with the way Viet Nam is viewed as an increasingly active player on the global political and security stage? What underlies a confidence in New Zealand about Viet Nam's capacity to contribute as a regional and global partner? And what of the origins and basis of such confidence?

When New Zealand cosponsored the 1977 General Assembly resolution to admit the Socialist Republic of Viet Nam to membership of the United Nations, shortly after having supported a similar bid for its entry to the Asian Development Bank<sup>2</sup>, bilateral diplomatic relations were still in their infancy. Recognition of the Democratic Republic of Viet Nam had come in September 1973, but it was not until May 1975, after the fall of Saigon, that Prime Minister Wallace Rowling signed off on the papers to establish diplomatic relations with the DRVN, through the New Zealand Embassy in Beijing.

Announcing the move the following month, the Prime Minister made clear New Zealand's reasoning for drawing closer to the DRVN (which was to be replaced by the nation-wide Socialist Republic of Viet Nam in 1976). It had "become the most

---

<sup>1</sup> In keeping with the spirit of Track II dialogues, views expressed in this paper are personal to the author and are not to be taken as representing New Zealand Government policy. I am grateful to Neil Robertson of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade for assistance in locating some material for this paper.

<sup>2</sup> NZ/Vietnam Policy Review, attached to report to Minister of Foreign Affairs, 20 June 1988.

important country in Indo-China, with the capacity to exert a major influence on the future course of events in South-east Asia.”<sup>3</sup> A few days earlier, speaking at the annual conference of the New Zealand Institute of International Affairs, the Prime Minister noted that as one chapter closed, another was opening:

I can say, with conviction, ...that we must, the countries of Asia and the Pacific, encourage the people of Indo-China to reintegrate themselves into our developing community...the next step, I believe, is for us and our partners in the Pacific – and perhaps ASEAN countries above all – to make it clear that we would welcome participation by the countries of Indo-China in the schemes of regional cooperation which have already evolved...[and] we must work for that wider framework of political and economic consultation which lies at the heart of this Government's regional foreign policy.<sup>4</sup>

How some of this might happen was the subject of comments at that time by the then head of the Foreign Ministry's Asia Division, Brian Lynch, who is participating in this Dialogue meeting. In an article on Indo-China, he pointed to the importance of the other states of Southeast Asia coming to terms with the DRVN – and quickly. The basis was understanding and accepting each other's legitimate role and aspirations. From there the development of trade, ministerial visits, and joint membership of regional institutions would follow. Given, he said, that the ASEAN members had already developed the habit of cooperation and consultation, “a basis exists therefore for a collective invitation in due course to the Indo-China countries to take part in development efforts of a regional nature.”<sup>5</sup>

By its actions in recognising the changes that had taken place in Saigon (and also in Phnom Penh), New Zealand indicated its acceptance of the new political configuration in Indo-China and was prepared to establish a working relationship with it:

the fact is that Indo-China is part of the wider region – of Asia and the Pacific – to which New Zealand belongs and in which we are trying to play a helpful role... [Accreditation to Hanoi from Beijing is one of the measures

---

<sup>3</sup> Statement by Prime Minister Rowling, 26 June 1975, *Foreign Affairs Review*, June 1975

<sup>4</sup> Dunedin 17 May 1975.

<sup>5</sup> *Foreign Affairs Review*, July 1975

that] represent solid beginnings for a new set of relationships which New Zealand must develop.<sup>6</sup>

Prophetic words: it is worth remembering in terms of New Zealand's current foreign policy priorities around closer regional integration that such policies are not at all new but indeed of long standing. They reflect a realisation sensed even then in New Zealand that its future lay with Asia and with promoting a benign politico-security (and therefore economic) environment in which to operate and benefit.

The place of regional arrangements had indeed been canvassed in some detail when the newly-accredited, Beijing-based, New Zealand Ambassador, Bryce Harland, called on Prime Minister Pham Van Dong, in October 1975. Responding to Harland's question about Viet Nam's views on regional cooperation, including ASEAN, Prime Minister Dong confirmed his country's interest in relations with all its neighbours but was still to see what ASEAN was like. Was it, he asked, another SEATO? "Definitely not" Harland replied. ASEAN was a regional movement, seen by New Zealand "as offering one of the best prospects for avoiding future tension and conflict in Southeast Asia [which was why New Zealand] was therefore trying to develop closer relations with it." Harland went on to add that "in New Zealand's view, no one regional body met all needs, but each one contributed something to the development of the spirit of regional cooperation" - to which Prime Minister Dong confirmed that his government would be considering carefully the question of participation.<sup>7</sup>

Viet Nam was not, however, to join ASEAN - as its seventh member - until July 1995. New Zealand's own relations with Viet Nam, scarcely substantial at the outset, grew even more distant as a result of the Vietnamese intervention in Cambodia in 1978. The small flow of Vietnamese students stopped, and while two Vice-Ministers visited New Zealand in the early years, no New Zealand Minister visited Viet Nam until 1989.<sup>8</sup> Two-way trade, that in 1975 was less than \$NZ500,000 had, by 1991, still not exceeded \$2.5m (it reached \$40m, of which

---

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Meeting report attached to letter from Bryce Harland to Secretary of Foreign Affairs Frank Corner, 21 October 1975.

<sup>8</sup> Vice-Minister of Foreign Affairs, Phan Hien and Vice-Minister of Agriculture, Tong Tran Dao, both in the latter part of 1978. See also note 12.

\$36m were NZ exports, by 1995). The rhetoric of Rowling and others had been dealt a blow; and the work of closer regional participation still lay ahead.

Viet Nam's diplomatic isolation was to last some years and put on hold its entry into many international and regional organisations. Having joined the UN in 1977, and the World Health Organisation the previous year<sup>9</sup>, participation in major organisations was relatively limited in the 1980s, especially in terms of regional institutions.<sup>10</sup>

In a 1988 New Zealand Foreign Ministry policy review paper prepared for - and approved by - its Minister, it was concluded that the co-sponsorship of Viet Nam's UN membership had been the political high point: in effect the relationship had marked time for most of the ten years that followed.<sup>11</sup> But that same paper concluded that time was right to develop a range of new contacts with Viet Nam, including a resumed aid programme, a Ministerial visit to New Zealand as well as a trade mission, and talks on bilateral, regional and international issues. Viet Nam, it was recalled, had "the potential in the long term to become a leading political and economic force in Southeast Asia."

In the following years, a series of Ministerial and trade missions took place in both directions.<sup>12</sup> In 1994, the government publicly signalled its wish to establish representation in Hanoi;<sup>13</sup> and the embassy, along with a consulate-general in Ho Chi Minh City, was opened in 1995. Prime Minister Jim Bolger headed a delegation of officials and trade representatives for the opening of these offices – the first such visit by a New Zealand leader to Viet Nam.

For Viet Nam, 1995 was a watershed in many respects. Apart from joining ASEAN<sup>14</sup>, it also established formal relations with the United States and a framework agreement with the EU. This paved the way for subsequent membership of APEC in

---

<sup>9</sup> Viet Nam was already a member of UNESCO through continuation by the SRVN of accession by the Bao Dai Government in 1951.

<sup>10</sup> Viet Nam joined the IAEA in 1981.

<sup>11</sup> Viet Nam Policy Paper 20 June 1988.

<sup>12</sup> Deputy Foreign Minister Le Van Triet to New Zealand April 1989, Foreign Minister Russell Marshall to Viet Nam in November 1989, New Zealand trade missions in 1990 and 1992 (the latter led by Trade Negotiations Minister Hon Philip Burdon).

<sup>13</sup> Speech by Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Rt Hon Don McKinnon 24 January 1994

<sup>14</sup> Viet Nam had joined ASEAN's Regional Forum (ARF) when that group had been established in 1994.

1998, for which it was the host country in 2006, as well as for ASEM, which it hosted in 2004.

The tempo of engagement with Viet Nam as a regional partner quickened concomitantly. As Viet Nam looked itself to participate more actively in regional institutions, so did New Zealand seek to engage. Prime Minister Helen Clark led a delegation to Viet Nam in 2003, a visit reciprocated two years later by Prime Minister Phan Van Khai.

Amongst the significant outcomes from the 2005 visit, several were related to the matter of regional and multilateral cooperation. In the Declaration of Cooperation signed by the two Prime Ministers on 9 May, emphasis was put on the vital role of the United Nations, strengthening its role in promoting international security and seeking reforms that would enhance its efficiency. But the Declaration also stressed the importance of ASEAN in ensuring peace in the region and dialogue on regional issues. New Zealand signalled its impending move towards accession to the Treaty of Amity (concluded later that year), and noted Viet Nam's own moves towards accession to the World Trade Organisation. APEC, which Viet Nam had joined in 1998, and an ASEAN/Australia/New Zealand Free Trade Agreement were also cited as important pillars in the development of the economic environment.

Not included in the Declaration itself, but covered in meetings between the leaders was Viet Nam's declared bid for membership of the United Nations Security Council for a two-year term beginning in January 2008.

Consistent with the sense reflected in the Declaration, but also a broader desire to see Viet Nam engaging more actively internationally, Prime Minister Clark offered her Vietnamese counterpart New Zealand's support for Security Council membership. In so doing, New Zealand became one of the first countries outside ASEAN to make such a commitment. New Zealand saw – and sees – Viet Nam as increasingly influential in the region and ready to take its rightful place in the international community as well as pursuing its integration in the world economy.

These decisions took place in the context of New Zealand's own reassessment of its relations with Asia, and particularly with Southeast Asia. Beginning in 2003 with a

process that took the name “Seriously Asia”, government, academia, and think tanks began work on determining more precisely the gaps and needs in terms of New Zealand’s relationships with the region.

Some of this now resonates in the Foreign Ministry’s own *Statement of Intent* for 2007-2010. Recalling that national engagement with Asian countries has a history of more than half a century, the *Statement* notes New Zealand’s substantial and direct interests in the region that are now on such a scale that the impact of conflict or serious unrest would be of particular concern. The paper refers to the importance of APEC and the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and to the longstanding relationship with ASEAN and to its interests lying in “supporting and encouraging [regional organisations’] further evolution as direct or indirect contributors to stability and security.” It describes the establishment of the East Asia Summit (EAS) in 2005 as having “potentially far-reaching importance for the region...as a forum for annual strategic dialogue among leaders and a mechanism to promote regional cooperation and integration.”<sup>15</sup> The point had not been lost on policy-makers that the summit meeting amongst ASEAN, Australia and New Zealand, that took place in Vientiane in 2004, had been the first such gathering since 1977 – a rather sobering commentary on the pace of New Zealand’s regional engagement in those intervening years.

New Zealand’s policy on engagement with Asia is now clearly articulated in a recent government paper, *Our Future with Asia*.<sup>16</sup> Four specific challenges were identified. One of these was New Zealand had to develop a sense that its interests and those of the Asian region were intertwined, and that greater engagement was essential as those countries and economies themselves strengthened their collaboration. Also identified was the need, as a “good neighbour”, to work at shared interests in the pursuit of regional security and stability and the addressing of transnational issues.<sup>17</sup>

To some extent, giving effect to such aspirations will demand a greater commitment of resource and participation around the key regional institutions already referred to above. The eventual appointment of an Ambassador to ASEAN,

---

<sup>15</sup> *Statement of Intent 2007-2010*, MFAT, Wellington, p. 32.

<sup>16</sup> MFAT, 2007

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.* p. 6.

under the terms of its new Charter arrangements, will provide a particular focus; but important too will be greater participation in the councils of the EAS, ARF and the like, at both political and technical levels.

In terms of New Zealand's engagement with Viet Nam in these processes, a few recent examples demonstrate the growing level of collaboration. One that is the subject of considerable work behind the scenes is around Viet Nam's stated preparedness to look in the short term at participating in United Nations peacekeeping operations. At the political level, but also in discussions between defence and diplomatic personnel, New Zealand has welcomed this statement of position by Viet Nam as a clear signal of commitment to the pursuit of regional and international security and to the underpinning principles around United Nations-led initiatives. Through its new Mutual Assistance Programme with Viet Nam, the New Zealand defence authorities have provided a platform for collaboration and exchanges on a variety of defence-related programmes, including those related to shared interests in United Nations peacekeeping operations.

Viet Nam has also engaged recently in a number of other initiatives in which New Zealand has had particular involvement. In 2007, following an invitation extended to Foreign Minister Pham Gia Khiem, Viet Nam participated for the first time in an Asia-Pacific Outreach Forum on the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI). With its goals of sharing information and acting to deter the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, the PSI is highly relevant to regional security priorities; and Viet Nam's informal indication at the Auckland Forum that it was considering endorsing PSI principles in the future was widely welcomed.<sup>18</sup> It continues to look very closely at the rules and principles of PSI in the broader context of its responsibilities as a good ASEAN and international citizen.

Earlier this year, Viet Nam participated as an observer at the Cluster Munitions Conference in Wellington that set the stage for a convention to be signed in Dublin in May 2008. While Viet Nam was not in a position to sign the Wellington Declaration that confirmed states' commitment to negotiating a new treaty

---

<sup>18</sup> In the same disarmament vein, Viet Nam's ratification of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty in March 2006 was lauded as bringing the world a step closer to a ban on nuclear explosions, and acting as an example for ten other signatories to the Treaty who had still to ratify: Statement by Hon Phil Goff, Minister of Disarmament and Arms Control, 24 March 2006. [www.beehive.govt.nz/release/goff](http://www.beehive.govt.nz/release/goff)

addressing the humanitarian hard posed by cluster munitions, the statement by the Vietnamese delegation on the importance of international cooperation and assistance was widely welcomed. Viet Nam has indicated that it does not possess such munitions, nor has the intention to do so. While accession to a new treaty will require further work, Viet Nam attended the Dublin meeting as an observer, indicative of the serious intent with which it views this issue.

Viet Nam has also participated actively in meetings of the Interfaith Dialogue process, most recently in Phnom Penh in April 2008. The delegation made clear the importance attached by Viet Nam to a process that facilitated the spreading of messages about religious diversity, in a region where religion often lay at the heart of conflict and dissent.

New Zealand of course welcomed Viet Nam's accession to the World Trade Organisation in 2007. It regards the WTO as the single most potent mechanism to expand market access and regards its rules and disputes procedures as critical to protecting national interests.<sup>19</sup> For New Zealand, Viet Nam's accession was a logical step by a country of growing economic importance in the region, and globally. But it also laid a firm foundation for future development of bilateral and plurilateral trading arrangements that complement multilateral activity.

These few examples of recent activity are by no means the whole picture, but are illustrative of the way in which Viet Nam, the world's 13<sup>th</sup> most populous nation, and on track to become a middle-income economy within the next year or two, is moving to exert an influence, and play a role, commensurate with the expectations articulated for it some thirty years ago. Other contributors will cover Viet Nam's important bilateral relationships, with countries of the region as well as other major players. But in terms of multilateral institutional cooperation, there is now a constellation of activity that potentially brings Viet Nam's participation and New Zealand aspirations – economic, political, security – into closer alignment.

If charted, the relationship graph would indicate a steadily rising level of participation by Viet Nam – albeit with something of a plateau in the 80s. The New Zealand line would look a little different: aspiration, as the earlier part of this paper

---

<sup>19</sup> *Statement of Intent 2007-2010*, pp. 44-45.

attests, was never lacking, and the broad objectives for closer regional collaboration, set out in recent policy papers, actually have a longer history. But it is beyond question that the early rhetoric, at least in relation to Southeast Asia, had not always been backed in intervening decades with quite the level of action that might have been anticipated.

The real change, however, has been the New Zealand commitment in recent years to engage more deeply with the countries of Asia, including Viet Nam, and to apply greater resources to this end. A process that included the recent policy paper *Our Future with Asia* has now been complemented by an undertaking to step up the promotion of foreign policy and trade interests, including lifting capacity in high-priority areas such as Asia, and greater funding for New Zealand's Asia Security Fund to build regional capacity to combat terrorism and other transnational threats.<sup>20</sup> Already, in recent months, there has been a greater level of engagement between defence, police and customs personnel of both Viet Nam and New Zealand with these broader regional security goals in view.

In essence, therefore, New Zealand's support for Viet Nam's greater participation in the councils of the region should be viewed as part of a continuum, rooted in fundamental foreign policy principles about its interests best being advanced multilaterally, and through international organisations.<sup>21</sup> But it is due also to a palpable confidence that Viet Nam is now demonstrably capable of playing a pivotal role, in this part of the world, in promoting security and prosperity interests that very much accord with those of New Zealand.

Pursuing a broader, and deeper, relationship with Viet Nam, including on regional issues, is not only logical: it will be buttressed by the investment of greater resource by New Zealand to this end. And the fact of a bilateral policy dialogue, the first of its kind between Viet Nam and New Zealand, serves amply to reinforce this point. Collaboration in multilateral institutions will grow, fostered through the

---

<sup>20</sup> Statement by Foreign Minister Winston Peters, 16 April 2008. [www.beehive.govt.nz/release/peters](http://www.beehive.govt.nz/release/peters)

<sup>21</sup> Terence O'Brien talks about multilateralism as a "vital New Zealand national interest" and suggests that a successful Asia will be important in the shaping of those interests. *New Zealand International Review*, Vol. XXXIII, No. 3, May/June 2008, pp. 11, 13.

development of a range of bilateral cooperation arrangements. The vision articulated by Prime Minister Rowling and others over thirty years ago is now steadily being fulfilled.

Views expressed in this paper are personal to the author and are not to be taken as representing the full delegation or the Asia New Zealand Foundation