ASEAN Regionalism at the Indochinese Fault Line

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ASEAN member states have every reason to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the creation of their Southeast Asian regional grouping. Against all odds, ASEAN leaders have succeeded in grouping together ten different states in one of the most culturally, linguistically, and religiously diverse parts of the globe.⁴⁹ That they also did this in one of the most contested regions of the planet only makes the ASEAN story even more significant. Southeast Asia reminds us of Fernand Braudel's history of the Mediterranean in which he uses the sea to connect its members into a whole.⁵⁰ At the same time, one cannot but realize how much this 'Southeast Asian Mediterranean' remains a coveted and dangerous place in the world.⁵¹

Taking a historical perspective allows us to look at regionalism in four different ways. First, going back in time effectively sheds light on why the Southeast Asian region and Vietnam in particular have been so important geopolitically. Second, it underscores some of the successes ASEAN has achieved in building a flexible and pragmatic regional organization, especially its ability to admit three very different Indochinese states in the 1990s –Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. Third, it shows that an Indochinese fault line still runs through ASEAN and could be a potential source of regional instability in the future. Lastly, given that Canada shares the Pacific Ocean with ASEAN and is intensifying its relationships with these countries, it is worth keeping this wider geopolitical picture in mind, for Canada is also a part of this dynamic and rapidly changing region.

Between the Indian Ocean economy and the Chinese Empire

Since antiquity, Southeast Asia has been at the intersection of a vibrant Indian Ocean economy extending from the Red Sea to southern China by way of India. Spices attracted Arab, Indian, and Chinese merchants to maritime Southeast Asia while the Chinese exported silk, porcelain, and tea. Vietnam was for a millennium the Chinese Empire's strategic gateway to this Indian Ocean trade. From the 2nd Century BC to the 10th century AD, Red River Vietnam was the southernmost Chinese province bordering the sea. The Vietnamese gained their independence, but had to repel the Mongols in the 1 century who wanted to push their Eurasian Empire spanning the Silk Road from Bagdad to Canton in order to reach the Southeast Asian Spice Islands via Vietnam. The Chinese briefly returned to Vietnam under the Ming in the 15th century as they tried to push their exchanges and power into the Indian Ocean via a maritime route. Imperial armadas left Vietnam before attacking

⁴⁹ For an optimistic account of ASEAN, see: Kishore Mahbubani, *The ASEAN Miracle: A Catalyst for Peace* (Ridge Books, 2017).

⁵⁰ Fernand Braudel, *La Méditerranée (*Paris: Armand Colin, 1990).

Denys Lombard, "Une autre 'Méditerranée' dans le Sud-Est asiatique," *Hérodote*, 88 (1998) : 184-193.

Malacca and creating a short-lived Pax Sinica over the Southeast Asian Mediterranean.⁵² Chinese vessels ventured as far as Mogadishu.

Following the withdrawal of the Chinese navy in 1433, Atlantic imperial states entered the Indian Ocean in two main waves. In the 16-17th centuries, Iberian maritime empires connected the Atlantic world to the Indian and Pacific Oceans by pushing sea routes around the tips of Africa and South America. While the Iberians connected the world for the first time, India, Southeast Asia, and southern China were its economic motor. A second wave of empires arrived in the 18-19th centuries –the Dutch in Indonesia, the British in India, Burma, and Singapore; the French in Indochina, while the United States extended its land empire across the Pacific by taking Hawaii, Guam, and the Philippines by force. Euro-Americans divided up the region; but no single empire ever ruled all of Southeast Asia to structure it politically, culturally, or linguistically into a shared regional identity similar to the one the Romans left their 'European' successors states.

Southeast Asia and Vietnam acquired their full geopolitical significance in this imperial competition in the 20th century as the Chinese Empire crumbled in 1911. This left Chinese communists and nationalists fighting as to who would put the pieces back together again. In many ways, the end of the Chinese Empire was as important as the fall of the Roman Empire centuries earlier. No one knew this better than the Japanese who sought to build their own empire on top of the shattered Chinese one. As the world moved towards the Second World War, the US President Franklin Roosevelt carefully followed Japanese imperial expansion down the Chinese coast into northern Vietnam in 1940. After attacking the US Navy at Pearl Harbor a year later, the Japanese used the deep-water port of Cam Ranh Bay to strike deep into Southeast Asia, overturning Euro-American empires and taking the Strait of Malacca in a few months. By rolling back the Japanese maritime Empire during World War II, the Americans replaced the Japanese as the unrivalled power in Asia. No one else could challenge American naval control over the Pacific and Indian Oceans. The Chinese Empire remained in tatters during the immediate wake of World War II as the British, French, and Dutch scrambled to recover theirs. The Soviets occupied half of Korea, but their Pacific force was small and never really a priority. A maritime *Pax Americana* emerged, and, given how the Japanese used it during the war, US strategists considered Vietnam to be central to protecting the Southeast Asian region from another attack from the north.

The Americans would have been happy to promote a liberal economic order in Asia aligned with the US and were even ready to push the French and the British to decolonize to open world markets. However, Washington put this on hold in 1949-1950 when the Chinese communists took power in all of China and the Korean War broke out. With the Second World War firmly in mind, the Americans feared that Chinese and Soviet domination of Eurasia would translate into another offensive on Southeast Asia.

From Truman to Johnson (1945-1968), American presidents sought to contain communist expansion at the Vietnamese pass. The Chinese for their part feared that the

⁵² Geoff Wade, "The Zheng He Voyages: A Reassessment," Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society, 78,1 (2005): 37-58.

Atlantic Alliance would strike them along their vulnerable coastal underbelly as the West and the Japanese had done in the 19th century. In the end, the Chinese and Americans clashed directly in Korea and opposed each other indirectly in Indochina: Washington supported the French against Ho Chi Minh's communist Vietnam while Mao assisted Ho Chi Minh. In 1965, President Johnson intervened directly in Vietnam by dispatching US troops to prevent South Vietnam from falling to the North Vietnamese communists. Mao sent 300,000 soldiers into North Vietnam to help rebuild bombed out roads and free-up Vietnamese troops to fight in the south. After a savage war, the Americans pulled out of Vietnam in 1975 from Cam Ranh Bay and then watched as the communists took all of former French Indochina: Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia.

ASEAN prevails at the Indochinese Pass

ASEAN came to life in the midst of this extraordinary rivalry over Indochina and Southeast Asia writ large. Although ASEAN was conceived during the Cold War, it was a Southeast Asian creation, not an American one in disguise. Anti-communism and fear that communism would spread further into the region unified many of ASEAN original five member states (Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand). Several leaders feared communist insurgencies in their own countries. In their perception, a communist victory next door in Indochina would have only made things worse. At the same time, early ASEAN regionalism benefitted from the large American military presence in Indochina as well as the economic and security advantages it created. In particular, the Thais and the Filipinos had close bilateral military, economic, and security ties to the US.

Despite their anti-communism, ASEAN leaders demonstrated a high-level of pragmatism and discretion in dealing with each other and their communist neighbours, including China. ASEAN leaders were flexible and preferred "consultation and consensus". They navigated adroitly the dangerous waters of the Vietnam War and the American abrupt exit from Indochina. The Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality (ZOPFAN) declaration of 1971 was one example among several allowing ASEAN leaders to follow a more neutral track in a post-American Southeast Asia and to keep regionalism on track despite potentially hostile communist victories in Indochina.

While each country maintained bilateral relations with the US, ASEAN leaders increasingly realised that their organization could provide them with more leverage in international affairs. ASEAN never tried to promote rapid political and economic integration like its European counterpart. It focused on building a regional order through consensus, dialogue, and institutional incrementalism. Lest we forget, ASEAN regionalism never enjoyed the stability which the Western European project enjoyed during the Cold War. The 'nuclearization' of the international system may have provided a long, if fragile, peace for Western Europe, but it saw the 'Great Powers' take their rivalries southwards, turning the Indochina War in Southeast Asia into the deadliest conflagration of the entire Cold War.

ASEAN leaders certainly demonstrated pragmatism and impressive audacity when they offered a path to membership for communist Vietnam following the signing of the Paris Peace Accords in 1973. Convinced that they were on the right side of (Marxist) History, Vietnamese communists, however, rebuffed the invitation. They believed that they had a duty to support the Indochinese and eventually the bigger Southeast Asian revolution which they had long imagined. As it turned out, they were wrong. Two Vietnamese diplomat-scholars have recently recognized that Hanoi erred by not realizing the degree to which ASEAN leaders were sincere in making their invitation; that they were not American stooges; and that ASEAN was not a regional carbon copy of Washington's South East Asian Treaty Organization (SEATO).53

This brings me to one of the biggest challenges to ASEAN regionalism – the Third Indochina War and continued big power rivalries over Southeast Asia. The Third Indochina War confirmed that the Americans were not the only ones convinced that there was a geopolitical connection between Vietnam (Indochina) and Southeast Asia. Before Saigon had even fallen to Hanoi in 1975, the Soviets and the Chinese had started competing for Hanoi's good graces following the outbreak of intense ideological differences and their violent border clashes in central Asia in 1969. Convinced that the Soviets had now become their most dangerous enemy, the Chinese began normalizing their relations with the US in one of the most important 'pivots' in modern diplomatic history. Still at war with the US, Vietnamese communists saw potential betrayal in Beijing's rapprochement with their enemy. Meanwhile, the Soviets saw encirclement in Sino-American containment and threw their weight behind Hanoi. And convinced that the Vietnamese had sold out to the Soviets, the Chinese supported the anti-Vietnamese Khmer Rouge taking over in Cambodia in 1975.

The Khmer Rouge lit a match at the bottom of this explosive Eurasian communist edifice when they launched cross-border raids into southern Vietnam.⁵⁴ In late 1978, Hanoi signed a security agreement with Moscow, overthrew the Khmer Rouge, and occupied Cambodia in 1979 as part of its own Indochinese regional order. The Chinese counterattacked in February while the Soviet Navy moved into Cam Ranh Bay and pushed back against the US maritime imperium. In a fascinating turn of events, the Chinese dealt Hanoi a devastating blow on the diplomatic front by working closely with the US and ASEAN against Vietnam's control of Indochina and Soviet expansion into the South China Sea.⁵⁵

Determined to modernize his country's economy, Mikhail Gorbachev did the most to end the Third Indochina War by normalising relations with China and forcing Hanoi to do the same. As Hanoi pulled its troops out of Cambodia and communism crumbled in favour of economic liberalism, ASEAN leaders lost no time building a new relationship with

⁵³ SEATO disappeared in 1977 as the Americans and Chinese joined forces against the Soviets and their Vietnamese allies. See: Nguyen Vu Tung, "The Paris Agreement and Vietnam-ASEAN Relations in the 1970s" and Luu Doan Huynh, "The Paris Agreement of 1973 and Vietnam's Vision of the Future," The Third. Indochina War, eds Odd Arne Westad and Sophie Quinn-Judge (London: Routledge, 2006), 87-122.

⁵⁴ Christopher Goscha, "La géopolitique vietnamienne vue de l'Eurasie : quelles leçons pour aujourd'hui ?" Hérodote, 157 (2015): 23-38.

⁵⁵ On Sino-ASEAN relations, see "Vietnam, the Third Indochina War and the meltdown of Asian internationalism," The Third Indochina War, eds Odd Arne Westad and Sophie Quinn-Judge (London: Routledge, 2006), 152-186.

Indochina. Thailand's Chatchai Choonhavan, whose father had once sold arms to Ho Chi Minh, famously offered in 1988 to turn Indochina "from a battlefield into a market place". Having watched neighbouring Asian 'tigers' (including China) develop their economies while the Indochinese ones floundered in Moscow's COMECON, Vietnamese communists looked to normalise relations with ASEAN in order to help them reform their own economy in line with the party's 1986 *doi moi* [Renovation] reform policy.⁵⁶

For the ASEAN leadership, flexibility, pragmatism, and the disappearance of the communist threat allowed them to extend membership to the Indochinese states in order to build a larger Southeast Asian regional organization, just as the European Union prepared to admit former communist bloc countries into its fold. ASEAN leaders also realized that they could better control communist Vietnam and its sister republics in Laos and Cambodia by integrating them into its regional institutions and agreements rather than letting Indochina develop as a rival regional body. This explains why the decision by the Vietnamese Communist to join ASEAN in 1995 is an implicit recognition that communist Vietnam's desire to create a communist Southeast Asian regional entity had in effect failed.⁵⁷

ASEAN's Indochinese fault-line?

While all eyes have understandably focused on a resurgent China, its massive investment in regional development and infrastructure projects as well as its return to the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean via a (not-so-new) maritime Silk Road, 58 less attention has been paid to the tremors that are reverberating along the Indochina fault-line. In Cambodia, the opposition leader of the Cambodian National Rescue Party (CNRP), Sam Rainsy, has fanned the flames of an anti-Vietnamese form of Cambodian nationalism to discredit the current Prime Minister, Hun Sen. In their bid to paint Hun Sen as a Vietnamese puppet, Sam Rainsy and others have stressed the Prime Minister's close relations with Vietnamese communists, training in Hanoi, and fluency in Vietnamese. They played the anti-Vietnamese card while forgetting where such xenophobia led Cambodia in the past. Sam Rainsy went further by linking his anti-Vietnamese nationalism to a pro-Chinese stance on the South China Sea: "We are on the side of China, and we support China in fighting against Vietnam over the South China Sea issue [...] The islands belong to China, but *yuon* is trying to occupy (the islands) from China, because *yuon* is very bad". ⁵⁹ Sam Rainsy's CNRP gave Hun Sen and Hanoi a real scare by making a strong showing in the 2013 elections. Despite Hun Sen's efforts to censure Sam Rainsy's and his anti-Vietnamese vitriol, the opposition

⁵⁶ Balázs Szalontai, "From battlefield into marketplace: The end of the Cold War in Indochina, 1985–1989," *The End of the Cold War and The Third World*, eds. Artemy Kalinovsky and Sergey Radchenko (New York: Routledge, 2011), 155-172.

⁵⁷ Christopher Goscha, Vietnam. A New History, (New York: Basic Books, 2017), p. 403.

⁵⁸ Pedroletti Brice, "Chine: le président Xi Jinping déroule ses «routes de la soie," *Le Monde*, (15 May 2017); "One Belt, One Road : les nouvelles routes de la soie," *Le Monde* (13 May 2017); and Jane Perlez and Yufan Huang, 'Behind China's 1 \$ Trillion Plan to Shake up the Economic Order," *The New York Times* (13 May 2017).

⁵⁹ Yuon is the pejorative term used widely by Khmers to refer to the Vietnamese. Cited in Tanner Greer, "Cambodia Wants China as its Neighborhood Bully," *Foreign Policy* (5 January 2017); David Hutt, "How China Came to Dominate Cambodia," *The Diplomat* (1 September 2016).

leader vows to challenge Hun Sen in the elections in 2018.

Determined to assert his independence vis-à-vis Hanoi and blunt the opposition's pro-Vietnamese accusations against him before the elections arrive, Hun Sen has dramatically improved his bilateral relations with China. Chinese investment has poured into Cambodia over the last decade. Hun Sen has also distanced himself from ASEAN efforts to treat the Chinese jointly as the aggressors in the South China Sea, agreeing with Beijing that the question should be dealt with on a bilateral basis. Despite scores of official visits to Phnom Penh stressing special historical relations between Cambodia and Vietnam, Hun Sen has plotted a diplomatic and economic course independent of Hanoi's Indochinese control. China's offers of assistance are hard to turn down and moving towards China allows Hun Sen to blunt accusations that he's "pro-Vietnamese". Meanwhile, China has at least temporarily succeeded in getting something of a proxy vote from Hun Sen against a common ASEAN declaration critical of China's expansion in the South China Sea – which completely undermines the consensus-based nature of the organization and effectively prevents it from speaking with one voice.

To make matters worse, Vietnamese-Cambodian relations seem to be worsening at the local level. Since the Cambodian elections in 2013, border and territorial disputes have tested Cambodian-Vietnamese trust, illegal immigration has become a divisive topic, and anti-Vietnamese demonstrations have occurred. Between July 2014 and June 2015, the Cambodian government forcibly deported 2,000 ethnic Vietnamese. In 2015, localised clashes broke out along the border between militant nationalists on both sides while Cambodian and Vietnamese diplomats have dusted off French colonial maps in a bid to solve their territorial disputes. In September 2016, local Vietnamese security officials in Binh Phuoc province let it be known that they would "not allow any force to undermine close Vietnamese-Cambodian relations" (Không để bất cứ thế lực nào chia rẽ tình đoàn kết Việt Nam – Campuchia). Fears of losing control over a stable and special relationship with Cambodia have only increased in 2017.60 Meanwhile, Cambodian demonstrators have burned Vietnamese flags in front of Hanoi's embassy in Phnom Penh and demanded the return of Kampuchea Krom, meaning the Vietnamese Mekong Delta. While Hun Sen has tried to rein in this anti-Vietnamese sentiment (just like Hanoi's leadership has struggled to control anti-Chinese demonstrations in Vietnam over territorial disputes), he has also informed Hanoi that he is no longer their yes-man in Cambodia and that Indochina is no longer an operational mechanism for conducting Vietnamese-Cambodian relations.⁶¹

While Hanoi has always had closer relations with its Lao partner, the latter is also distancing itself from a Vietnamese Indochinese model that has run its time. The Lao decision to open talks with China about building the Don Sahong hydropower project

⁶⁰ Nguyen Minh, 'Day lui am muu xuyen tac, chia re tinh huu nghi', *Quan Doi Nhan Dan* (2 January 2017), http://www.qdnd.vn/chong-dien-bien-hoa-binh/day-lui-am-muu-xuyen-tac-chia-re-tinh-huu-nghi-496458

^{61 &}quot;Why Cambodia has cosied up to China," The Economist (21 January 2017); Cheunboran Chanborey, "Cambodia's Strategic China Alignment," The Diplomat (8 July 2015); Tanner Greer, "Cambodia Wants China as its Neighborhood Bully," Foreign Policy (5 January 2017)

is one example of several. As in Cambodia, the Chinese are investing heavily in Laos on bilateral terms. Large-scale infrastructure projects are underway and more are in the works. To Hanoi's grand surprise, Laotian leaders have also refused to toe Vietnam's line on the South China Sea, albeit not to the same extent as Cambodia. In April 2016, the Lao President Boounnhang Vorachith traveled to Hanoi to reaffirm his country's "special relationship" with Vietnam. However, the day before that trip, the Chinese announced that Laos, Cambodia, and Brunei had agreed that the South China Sea dispute should be negotiated on a bilateral basis and not via ASEAN.⁶²

This is where things could become potentially dangerous. On the one hand, Cambodians bent on resurrecting anti-Vietnamese nationalism for domestic political needs do so at their own peril as it could spectacularly backfire. A similar brand of anti-Chinese xenophobia has recently re-emerged in Vietnam over the South China Sea. On the other hand, when the Vietnamese feel their security is under threat, they tend to latch on to their Indochinese model, the very regional body which Cambodian nationalists —and the Chinese supporting them—resent.

Hanoi's Indochinese model is perhaps not what it used to be during the Third Indochina War, but the Vietnamese still hold on to their "special relationships" when times get tough. Since 1945, Vietnamese communists have been deeply involved in building postcolonial states in Laos and Cambodia from the bottom up. Indochina was an ideological project of a communist kind; but it was also a mechanism for guaranteeing Vietnam's national security. With the end of the Cold War and the resolution of the Third Indochina War in 1991, Hanoi simultaneously normalized relations with the US and joined ASEAN in 1995. Hanoi assumed that *both* moves would help it counter the Chinese more effectively as Beijing distanced itself from Washington, and challenged the American imperial monopoly over Asia's high seas. However, the Vietnamese hedged their bets by trying to maintain their "special relationships" with Laos and Cambodia despite their membership in ASEAN.

The Chinese are clearly aware of this and are trying to pry Cambodia and Laos loose from Vietnam's Indochinese grip. At the same time, the Chinese are subtly undermining ASEAN's single voice as a regional institution on a geopolitical question vital to China's interests—unfettered access to the Indian Ocean via the South China Sea. Vietnam's Cam Ranh Bay lies right in the middle of that southern opening. It has since the time of the Han dynasty. With their eye on China's expanding maritime power, the Vietnamese have made a point of letting several countries use Cam Ranh: the Americans, the Japanese, the Russians, and others.

If the past is any guide, this Indochina fault-line—now a part of ASEAN—remains a

⁶² Du Nhat Dang, "Vietnam Fears Isolation on South China Sea Issue," *The Diplomat* (2 May 2016); Prashanth Parameswaran, "Laos Dam Risks Damaging Mekong River, Igniting Tensions with Vietnam," *The Diplomat* (19 December 2014).

⁶³ I base this on my reading of the Vietnamese press and reports on countless Vietnamese delegations working with the Lao and Cambodians on state-building, security, economics, intelligence, and education programs for Laos and Cambodia.

highly volatile one, particularly when Vietnam feels that its security is in danger. This fracture is coming under the most stress in the Mekong Delta where anti-Vietnamese Cambodian nationalism is raising its ugly head again (paralleled, again, by its anti-Chinese strain in Vietnam). If ever Sam Rainsy or his party were to come to power on a very nationalistic and anti-Vietnamese platform, relations could worsen rapidly between a Vietnamese communist leadership and a non-communist Cambodian leader who has none of Hun Sen's experience in recognizing the complexity of Hanoi's security needs.⁶⁴ Cambodian nationalists should be very careful for what they wish for. So should the Vietnamese.

Too many in the leadership remain convinced of the legitimacy of their "special relations" of an Indochinese kind. If border disputes, forced deportations of Vietnamese from Cambodia, and anti-Vietnamese and anti-Chinese nationalism sentiments got out of hand (and they have in the past), then it is quite possible that Hanoi would seek Indochinese fidelity from Laos and Cambodia. If that were to happen, it is also quite possible that the Chinese would voice their support publicly for the Cambodians (and Laos) against such Vietnamese "arrogance". It is not sure how Hanoi would react, but Vietnamese leaders would certainly link China's support of Cambodia to China's naval movements off Vietnam's long coastline. The fear of being surrounded would soon be on more than a few minds in Hanoi.

Implications for Canada

In order to prevent a local spark in the Mekong Delta from growing into a regional wildfire with the South China Sea winds blowing it in unpredictable directions, ASEAN leaders in particular, as well as their partners, need to remember that miracles do not prevent wars. Only cool-headed, flexible, pragmatic, and prescient diplomacy can do that. There is reason to celebrate ASEAN's regional success fifty years on. But it is also worth remembering just how dangerous this Southeast Asian Mediterranean can be, and that there is an Indochinese fault-line running through it and straight into the South China Sea. Feeling isolated on the South China Sea issue, it is no accident that Vietnam recently sent the Prime Minister to meet President Trump in Washington in May 2017, the first such visit from an ASEAN state. 65 It's still not clear whether the Trump administration understands how much Vietnam needs the US or the US needs Vietnam and ASEAN in this vital area of the world. Canada does. And we forget too often that Canada is not only an Atlantic power, but that this country is also a Pacific one, connected to this vibrant Southeast Asian Mediterranean by its own ports, sea lanes, and exchanges. Canada therefore has every reason to intensify its global relationships with Asia, ASEAN, and Vietnam in particular. It has in the past. It needs to do so again as we head further into the 21st century and a region in which ASEAN will continue to play a leading role in trade and security.

⁶⁴ Duncan McCargo, "Local poll leaves Hun Sen looking vulnerable in 2018 election," Nikkei Asian Review (8 June 2017), http://asia.nikkei.com/Viewpoints/Duncan-McCargo/Local-poll-leaves-Hun-Senlooking-vulnerable-in-2018-election?page=1. Accessed 11 August 2017.

⁶⁵ Murray Hiebert and Nguyen Manh Hung, "Opportunities & Challenges Await Vietnam Premier on Visit to Washington," cogitASIA, Center for Strategic & International Studies (25 May 2017), https:// www.cogitasia.com/opportunities-challenges-await-vietnam-premier-on-visit-to-washington/. Accessed 11 August 2017.