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An Unknown Chapter in Southeast Asia's Regionalism: The Republic of Vietnam and ASEAN Relations (1967–1975)

Ha Trieu Huy*

This article aims to review the evolution of the Republic of Vietnam (RVN)'s involvement in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), which was founded in 1967 by Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, the Philippines, and Indonesia. South Vietnamese leaders and diplomats designed a new foreign policy under the administration of Nguyen Van Thieu (1967–75) that shifted focus to Southeast Asia alongside the RVN's long-standing camaraderie with the United States. This demonstrated Thieu's keenness to engage with regional states for the purpose of nation-building and an anti-Communist future. The RVN's engagement with ASEAN reflected its efforts to foster a regionalization process along with peace, stability, and development in Southeast Asia, particularly after the withdrawal of the US and its allies. This study uses a qualitative approach, employing a wide range of archival collections housed at the National Archives Center II, Ho Chi Minh City and a handful of desk-research papers. The relationship is periodized into two phases. During the first phase (1967–72), the RVN embraced ASEAN's values and, despite its observer status, expected help in achieving its security and economic goals. After the 1973 Paris Peace Accords, ASEAN increasingly distanced itself from the RVN as members changed their stances, particularly as attacks by the Democratic Republic of Vietnam escalated in RVN territories. This paper aims to bridge a gap in scholarship by examining the positioning of the RVN in international and regional relations during the Cold War.

Keywords: Republic of Vietnam, ASEAN, regional cooperation, Southeast Asia, Vietnam War, Cold War

I Introduction

Southeast Asia became a theater of the Cold War in the mid-twentieth century, when both the United States and the USSR challenged each other's efforts to play a leading role in the world. Apprehensions related to the domino theory led the US to expand

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its strategic presence in several regions to thwart the expansionist goal of communism. In Vietnam, the French debacle in Dien Bien Phu in May 1954 sounded the death knell for the colonial administration, ruining the prospect of a reliable anti-Communist stronghold for the US in Southeast Asia. A general plebiscite of South Vietnamese civilians resulted in the establishment of a nascent government, the Republic of Vietnam (RVN), on October 26, 1955, which was headed by Ngo Dinh Diem and fully supported by the US.¹ After three years of quiet nation-building, Diem grappled with domestic fatigue of his anti-communism policy in rural areas, which led to the rise of the Southern Communists (Vietcong). In 1959, insurgencies by the Southern Communists pushed Diem's regime into a prolonged political and military crisis that lasted from 1960 to 1963 (Hannon 1967; Young 1968; Asselin 2011).

Although able to devise a coherent policy against the Communists thanks to his capable political adviser and brother Ngo Dinh Nhu, Diem failed to crush dissident social movements by Buddhists, students, and his Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) (Miller 2013). He imposed strict curfews and persisted with his policy to eradicate communism. Diem's despotism resulted in the 1963 coup d'état by the ARVN, which led to rule by military junta from 1963 to 1964 (Đoàn Thêm 1989, 35–36; Lâm Vĩnh Thế 2008, 130–152). In light of the political chaos in South Vietnam, the US president Lyndon Johnson implemented the "More Flags Campaign," which appealed to leaders of the Free World to deploy hundreds of troops to defend the RVN (Clarke 1988; Karnow 1997). The outbreak of the Vietnam War in 1965 brought Thailand, the Philippines, South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand into the conflict. It is not an exaggeration to state that the rampant development of communism in Southeast Asia had unintended consequences for several countries in the region and coerced those states to forge a collective effort to eradicate communism under the umbrella of the US. After two years of political precariousness, Nguyen Cao Ky and Nguyen Van Thieu² commanded the people's support. They democratized the country through the Committee of National Leadership in 1965, prior to the second election of the RVN in late 1967, when Thieu was elected president (Veith 2021).

1) Ngo Dinh Diem (1901–63) was a Vietnamese Catholic intellectual and the first president of the Republic of Vietnam. Diem was elected as president after the 1955 referendum in Saigon to establish an anti-Communist government in the south of Vietnam. Diem was overthrown and assassinated by the Army of the Republic of Vietnam in the 1963 coup d'état.

2) Nguyen Van Thieu (1924–2001) was elected president of the Second Republic of Vietnam. Thieu served in the ARVN and participated in the 1963 coup d'état. In 1965, as Thieu's position was rising in South Vietnam's political climate, he joined with Nguyen Cao Ky to form Uy Ban Lanh Dao Quoc Gia (the National Leadership Council) to democratize the regime after the political turmoil (1963–65). He was officially appointed as the president of the RVN after the 1967 universal election and reelected in 1971. He held this position until April 21, 1975, nine days before the fall of Saigon.

However, the long-drawn-out war in Indochina also embroiled Southeast Asian countries in the regional conflict. Public outcry in the US and antiwar movements in Vietnam undermined the reputation of the US in building a solid bulwark for the Free World and US allies were sucked into the quagmire (Nixon 1985; Karnow 1997; Kissinger 2003; Lê Cung 2015). The conflict necessarily affected the regional security of Southeast Asia. Both Thailand and the Philippines were embroiled in the Vietnam War with boots on the ground, and other countries in Southeast Asia were eager to restore peace in the region (Rahman 2007; Jayakumar 2011; Boi 2021). The 1957 formation of the European Economic Community (EEC) illustrated the importance of regionalism, which prioritized economic and political linkages in the interest of sustainable regional development. The formation of the EEC gave birth to the idea that Southeast Asian countries create their own regional organization to pursue peace and development. The establishment of the EEC was an example of stepping out of the shadow of the US to engage in joint efforts to build a community of Europeans with the ultimate goal of economic independence and a European identity (Mikesell 1958; Shenfield 1963). While Vietnam was coping with the burgeoning Communist uprisings, decolonized countries in Southeast Asia—including Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia—shifted their focus to financial and economic development as well as the restoration of peace in the region. Hence, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) was born on August 8, 1967, marking a breakthrough in regional cooperation among Southeast Asian countries with the hope of minimizing war while attaining political and economic prosperity.

Historians and researchers generally agree that the establishment of ASEAN was a product of regionalism rather than a political and military organization. In their 1967 proclamation, ASEAN's founding members agreed to implement joint action for regional cooperation in the spirit of equality and partnership and to contribute to peace, progress, and prosperity in the region (ASEAN 1967, 1–3). Economic and social success lay at the heart of ASEAN's policy and vision (ASEAN 1967, 2). These objectives led to concerted efforts by ASEAN members to strengthen cohesion and to devise a self-made policy to preserve both national independence and inter-nation dependence and elevate the position of Southeast Asia on the world stage. While it was assumed to be an outcome of the Cold War (Takano 1994, 94), ASEAN aimed to build a zone of peace, stability, and prosperity in Southeast Asia to set the ground for potential joint engagement in external warfare down the road.

This paper focuses on the RVN's diplomacy and reasons for participating in ASEAN as soon as it was established in 1967. Inspection of source materials at the National Archives Center II reveals that the RVN paid special attention to ASEAN and expressed hope of gaining full membership in the organization. I argue that South Vietnamese

leaders and diplomats designed a new foreign policy under the administration of Nguyen Van Thieu and shifted their focus to Southeast Asia after a long-standing camaraderie with the United States. This shift demonstrated Nguyen Van Thieu's eagerness to engage with regional states for the purpose of nation-building and an anti-Communist future for the RVN. The RVN's engagement with ASEAN illustrates the importance that South Vietnamese leaders placed on the regionalization process; it also highlights their efforts to accomplish the ultimate goal of peace, stability, and development in Southeast Asia in tune with their new foreign policy as the United States and its allies withdrew from Vietnam. ASEAN offered a means for the RVN to engage regionally. It would provide a stage for the RVN to demonstrate its mutual interests raise its strategic presence in the region, and help improve its international relations in Southeast Asia.

In examining the RVN's foreign policy toward ASEAN, I argue that the road to becoming an official member of ASEAN was uneven and can be periodized into two phases. During the first phase, from the establishment of ASEAN to the Paris Peace Accords (1967–72), South Vietnamese diplomats lobbied ASEAN members to recognize the RVN in regional forums. In contrast to the initial goodwill it received during this phase, the RVN faced numerous hurdles after the Paris Peace Accords were universally validated. Engagement became increasingly difficult for the RVN as the withdrawal of the US and allied troops drew a political veil over communism, allowing ASEAN members to resume connections with Communist states for reasons of economic expediency. Indeed, Singapore and Malaysia had forged a relationship and Indonesia had cemented its ties with the Communist Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) (i.e., North Vietnam). The détente between the US and the People's Republic of China (PRC) was enormously beneficial to the new vision of ASEAN, as the organization depended on both powers to enhance economic capacity. As a result, RVN's membership in ASEAN was abandoned and research on RVN-ASEAN relations was relegated to the back burner.

I-1 Existing Scholarship, Gaps, and New Evidence from Vietnam

Studies on the RVN's diplomacy are needed to fill gaps in the historiography. Current literature on the Vietnam War outlines the role of US foreign policy and accentuates the close-knit relationship between the US and the RVN. This paper intentionally neglects to review US foreign policy and concentrates exclusively on the RVN-ASEAN relationship and diplomacy, on which scholarship is scarce. There are some studies on Diem's diplomacy in general, as well as studies of regional relations and bilateral relationships between the RVN and specific Southeast Asian states, some of which are outlined below.

William Henderson and Wesley Fishel (1966) examine Diem's diplomatic process, from his selection of diplomats to his viewpoints on international relations. They

stress that Diem's major shortcomings were his limited capacity for talent evaluation and his short-staffed group of diplomats; thus, his regime barely achieved effective diplomatic results. The dearth of outstanding diplomats partially triggered a political crisis in his regime, which was notorious for nepotism in the eyes of international partners (Henderson and Fishel 1966, 3). Their critical argument accentuates Diem's disadvantages when coping with domestic fatigue to reinforce the supremacy of his power. Even though Diem strove to strengthen his relationship with contiguous and capitalist countries, he was unable to set up a healthy environment of diplomacy as he was amenable to the US administration.

Besides, numerous studies debate the role of the RVN in American historiography, focusing on military aspects or historical judgments of South Vietnamese administrations. Trần Nam Tiến (2020) employs a wide selection of English and Vietnamese archival documents and online sources to argue that Diem widely fraternized with countries in the region as well as from the Free World, noting that Diem developed diplomatic ties with neighboring countries, including Laos, Thailand, Cambodia, and the Philippines. Tiến (2020) paints a rich picture of the RVN's early diplomacy and its linkage with regional states. He makes some accurate assessments of the efficiency of the RVN's diplomacy under Diem's reign but upholds the opinion that Diem was a close client of the US, which limited his policies.

With a narrower scope of research, Ha Trieu Huy (2022) attempts a close analysis of a specific partner of the RVN: Thailand. Huy (2022) utilizes source materials housed at the Archives Center II in Ho Chi Minh City to dispel the notion that Thailand was the only significant party in the relationship, demonstrating that Thailand was a comrade of the RVN and that the latter received generous economic and military support from the former in their joint anti-Communist pursuits. Huy (2022) also scrupulously analyzes the role of overseas Vietnamese in Thailand, noting that the RVN benefited from overseas citizens' support of its foreign policy and their help in countering Communist propaganda. Nevertheless, the withdrawal of the US and its allies frustrated RVN ambitions, and changes in international relations reduced support from Thailand toward the end of the Vietnam War (Ha Trieu Huy 2022, 694–709).

Meanwhile, Leo Suryadinata (1991) pays scholarly attention to the triangular relationship between Jakarta, Hanoi, and Saigon during the Vietnam War. The central power of Sukarno was committed to a cozy relationship between Jakarta and Hanoi from the liberation of Jakarta in 1945 to 1965. In 1955, Indonesia set up a consulate in Hanoi after three years of having one in Saigon. Suryadinata confirms that while Indonesia sustained a two-Vietnam policy, Sukarno favored Hanoi as an illustration of the "nationalism" that Indonesia fully supported (Suryadinata 1991, 335). The Suharto

administration faced a dilemma as it endeavored to implement a policy of neutrality while supporting both Hanoi and Saigon. However, the Indonesian consulate in Saigon closed temporarily in 1965. Suryadinata also points out that at the Non-Aligned Movement summit in 1973, Indonesia partially recognized the Provisional Revolutionary Government of the Republic of South Vietnam (PRG), which was supported by North Vietnam, although Indonesia and Malaysia were ultimately unable to offer the PRG full membership in the Non-Aligned Movement. Thus, Indonesia offered only a lukewarm welcome to the RVN's involvement in ASEAN because it viewed Hanoi as the sole legitimate government in Vietnam and had maintained cordial links with Hanoi since the end of World War II. Suryadinata indicates that the RVN's path to ASEAN membership was made more arduous by the close friendship between Hanoi and Jakarta.

The Philippines and the RVN shared a common national interest in containing communism in Southeast Asia. Being the closest ally of the US in the region, the Philippines housed US military bases and diligently worked with the US to prevent the spread of communism in the context of the Cold War. Matthew Jagel (2013) notes that although the Philippine government proposed assistance to South Vietnam under Diem during the Vietnam War, Diem refused the offer, deeming it unnecessary. The birth of the Philippine Civic Action Group, or PHILCAG,³⁾ marked a deeper involvement of the Philippines in the conflict: the organization provided military and economic assistance to the RVN. It was not until 1965 that the participation of the Philippines in the Vietnam War gave rise to a grave controversy among Filipino politicians. While the US gave broad support to the government of Diosdado Macapagal, Ferdinand Marcos took a balanced approach to the war, advocating for the provision of medical aid packages instead of military forces. Marcos promoted helping Vietnamese people to restore peace and self-determination in the absence of "beliefs and persuasions" (Jagel 2013). He hoped the National Liberal Front⁴⁾ might consider this a form of neutral support outside the war (Jagel 2013, 37). As was the case with Thailand's support, the participation of the Philippines in the war not only yielded economic benefits for the RVN, but also continued to strengthen its thriving relationship with the US and helped Thieu's government to thwart the southward advance of communism. This strategy allowed the Philippines to

3) The Philippine Civic Action Group supplied civic aid to the ARVN and its allies during the Vietnam War. Its base was in Tay Ninh Province, northwest of Saigon. The first aid group arrived in the RVN in 1966.

4) The National Liberal Front of Vietnam, which was set up in 1960, gathered Southern Vietnamese Communists to struggle against the RVN and US intervention. The group was active in rural areas and tried to persuade the local authorities to abandon the RVN. It was not until 1969 that Southern Vietnamese Communists de-established this association to form the Provisional Revolutionary Government of South Vietnam (PRG).

achieve its anti-Communist objectives and assuage its fears about security in Southeast Asia. Jagel (2013) also sheds light on the changes in Philippine foreign policy regarding the Vietnam War under different presidents. Under the rule of Marcos, the Philippines forged mutually beneficial cooperation with the RVN to help the South Vietnamese government suppress attacks by Communists and provide humanitarian and other civic aid. Through the Philippines, the RVN appealed to ASEAN to deepen engagement with it in the realm of civic cooperation.

Singapore also paid close heed to the war in Vietnam and devised policies to adapt to the regional conflict. Ang Cheng Guan (2009) notes that Singapore ultimately pursued a policy of non-alignment to safeguard its nascent government, established in 1965. Even though Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew initially showed firm support for US involvement in the Vietnam War, he revised his foreign policy in 1967, when he realized that bombing North Vietnam would not result in US-backed forces gaining power. Lee also stressed that it was critical to arrive at a final settlement that would benefit Southeast Asia's future. He made the assumption that the war in Vietnam was merely a test of will, and that triumph would be achieved by the side that demonstrated greater patience (Ang 2009, 369–370). Ang (2009) claims there was an about-turn in Singapore's foreign policy with the onset of Soviet-Singapore diplomatic ties after the 1968 Tet Offensive, and notes that Lee sought to clear the air with the People's Republic of China (PRC) in the interest of Sino-Singapore diplomatic relations and to gain China's official recognition. Though there is a deficiency of source materials, Diego Musitelli's thesis contains a collection of press releases and memoirs about Lee Kuan Yew to sharpen his argument that Singapore adopted the domino theory and supported the US and RVN in crushing communism in Vietnam. Lee assumed that the fall of Saigon would trigger political trauma in Malaysia and negatively impact the organic political growth of Singapore (Musitelli 2007). However, with increasing apathy toward communism, Lee began focusing on the Sino-American détente and how it could benefit Singapore. To elevate Singapore's position on the international stage, Lee sought (and earned) diplomatic recognition from the PRC and abandoned its heretofore Vietnam policy.

Malaysian authorities ratified a strategy to stifle the development of communism, as the domino theory portended a bleak outcome for Malaysia's security. Pamela Sodhy (1987) focuses on the salient factors for Malaysia regarding the Vietnam War, particularly Anglo-American cooperation in preventing the domino theory from becoming a reality. As the US increased its influence in Vietnam through massive financial aid for France's war in Indochina, it also consolidated its power in Malaysia through allocations to the British counterinsurgency campaign. The increased Communist presence in Southeast Asia was a weighty problem in Malaysian politics. The Malaysian government showed

an unswerving commitment to anti-communism despite domestic movements by Malaysian students, which caused some political turmoil (Sodhy 1987, 46). However, Malaysia suggested civic support in place of military aid for the RVN and the US faced opposition from Malaysia when it escalated the war in Vietnam. Some groups of Malaysian politicians, in collaboration with like-minded politicians from Thailand and the Philippines, appealed for the end of the Vietnam War through the three-nation Association of Southeast Asia Conference and called for an All-Asia Peace Conference. Sodhy (1987) also notes a continued effort by ASEAN to convene a handful of conferences to de-escalate the conflict in Indochina. Danny Wong Tze-Ken (1995) provides detail of the cozy relationship between the RVN and Malaysia: Malaysian Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman visited the RVN twice in response to invitations from Diem, in 1958 and 1961. Major aid packages from Malaysia came in the form of its armed forces providing training to RVN forces in jungle warfare and Malaysia's police personnel training their counterparts in the RVN. Thereafter, Malaysia and the RVN were united in their common aim of eradicating communism. Wong (1995) presumes that the anti-Communist sentiment in Malaysia sprang from the specter of the Chinese threat along with great sympathy for the anti-Communist efforts in Vietnam. After the fall of Diem and the ensuing political upheaval, Malaysia remained closely connected to the RVN through the military training program. Indonesia, on the other hand, was opposed to the RVN after the deployment of US troops in 1965. Wong (1995) also reports on a 1966 visit by the South Vietnamese leader Nguyen Cao Ky to Malaysia to develop the long-standing relationship between the two countries as well as to float the idea of forming the Asian and Pacific Council (ASPAC) (Wong 1995, 68–99). This visit was a key precursor of the the RVN-ASEAN relationship.

These and other studies on the relationship between the RVN and ASEAN members before the establishment of ASEAN have investigated the progress of diplomatic relations between the RVN and Southeast Asian states. The scholars above conclude that the foreign policies of Southeast Asian states were heavily influenced by Sino-American rapprochement and the changing landscape of international relations. All the research implies that Southeast Asian countries had contradictory viewpoints on the Vietnam War. While some states conformed to the US foreign policy of supporting the RVN under the aegis of anti-communism, they were flexible in revising their foreign policy to be more pragmatic and acclimatize to the thaw in Sino-American relations. As a result, the role of the RVN in Southeast Asia was compulsorily acquiescent to neighboring states' new strategies. Those strategies and policies were the fundamental context within which the RVN navigated its ASEAN foreign policy. The shortcoming of existing literature is that it does not examine RVN's perspectives on ASEAN and its activity in the organization.

The third section of this paper aims to fill this gap by reviewing RVN attempts to establish high-level bilateral relationships, its participation in ASEAN meetings and associated advocacy, and its civic cooperation with the organization. It then summarizes the key hurdles that the RVN faced vis-à-vis ASEAN following the Paris Peace Accords. First, a brief background history is provided in section two.

I-2 Methodology

This paper employs collections of primary historical source materials on the RVN-ASEAN relationship. These materials are currently housed at the Vietnam National Archives Center II, where several collections of the former RVN regime are preserved and were only recently made available to the public. There are two primary archival folders, including those of the president of the Second Republic of Vietnam (DIICH) and the prime minister of the RVN (PTTgII). The folders include internal and external documents from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on ASEAN membership and the RVN's participation in ASEAN and other international organizational meetings. From these archives, I selected relevant documents on the RVN's involvement in ASEAN and evaluated their authenticity. I then arranged the materials, from the initial RVN documents about ASEAN to the final contacts between the RVN and ASEAN prior to the fall of Saigon in 1975, to chronologically map the progress of the relationship. The relationship is periodized into two phases, incorporating the history of ASEAN and the changing nature of international relations in the context of the Cold War.

Additional desk-research papers also provide significant insight for critically analyzing the RVN-ASEAN relationship. Recent studies on ASEAN members' viewpoints regarding the Vietnam War offer particularly salient information, allowing me to compare and contrast these viewpoints. I also investigated previous research on specific ASEAN countries and US foreign relations to situate the RVN in the changing landscape of international relations in Southeast Asia. Thanks to the availability of previous research, I provide a brief background history in the following section to outline the major factors that shaped the relationship between the RVN and ASEAN. Those sources were also beneficial to support the assertions made in this paper. However, as there remains a dearth of empirical studies on this topic, I have attempted to provide a roadmap for upcoming research to reexamine the role of RVN in ASEAN and Southeast Asia's international relations.

II Brief Background of the Republic(s) of Vietnam in the Context of Southeast Asia and US-PRC Relations

Southeast Asia was a pivotal territory and caught the attention of the US and Western countries as communism-driven national movements, which posed a serious threat to the leading role of the US and the power of capitalism in this region, surged after WWII (Mills 1950). Communist insurgencies raised nagging concerns about the appropriate strategy that the US should take in the region. Vietnamese Communists led efforts to thwart France's attempts to reclaim its colonial interests, fully aware of French intentions after the capitulation of Japan in Indochina. On September 2, 1945, Ho Chi Minh established the DRV. As soon as the proclamation was published, the French attacked several areas of Cochinchina and the Communists resorted to making concessions in the 1946 Ho–Sainteny agreement and the 1946 *modus vivendi* (Tønnesson 2010). This First Indochina War in late 1946 was a stark example of the prolonged conflict between Communists and Nationalists to seize political power in Vietnam.

In contrast, the French authorities created an anti-Communist regime as a political counterweight, calling on former Emperor Bao Dai to be the representative of the new government. The Accords de l'Elysée (Elysée Accords), signed by Bao Dai and the French on March 8, 1949 and ratified by the French National Assembly on January 29, 1950, formed the State of Vietnam as an independent member of the French Union. This regime was formally recognized as sovereign by states around the world. However, the overwhelming victory of Vietnamese Communists in Dien Bien Phu on May 7, 1954 marked the end of France's ability to maintain its grip on Indochina's political climate. The triumph of Communists blighted France's vision for the country and marked the onset of the Vietnam War, which churned Vietnam into a battlefield of ideologically opposing systems. With the exit of France in Indochina, the ability to uphold an anti-Communist stronghold in Southeast Asia was slipping away. The 1954 Geneva Accords were insignificant in furthering US foreign policy in Southeast Asia. These realities prompted a deeper engagement by the US to buttress the weakened strategic buffer zone in Vietnam and bolster the anti-Communist government. Truman's administration soon built a thriving relationship with Bao Dai's through economic and military aid packages to defend the State of Vietnam from impetuous Communist attacks. Under the aegis of the US, Ngo Dinh Diem, who was expected to cooperate with the US to contain communism in Vietnam, was "coronated." As soon as he was appointed prime minister by Bao Dai, Diem publicized his intention to de-establish the State of Vietnam and conduct a general referendum in Saigon on October 23, 1955 on the establishment of a new Republic of Vietnam (RVN) (Keesing's Research 1970, 17; Karnow 1997, 239; Miller 2013). Consequently, Diem

deposed Bao Dai and marked the birth of the First Republic of Vietnam on October 26, 1956 with a legislative election.

Although Diem demonstrated his commitment to US foreign policy at the dawn of the RVN, several of his internal policies resulted in bleak outcomes, triggering domestic fatigue from 1959 to 1963. In addition to Communist uprisings in rural areas aimed at unseating local RVN authorities, Diem's government also suffered from an unsavory reputation owing to nepotism and religious discrimination. The 1963 Buddhist crisis was a glaring illustration of the RVN's political turmoil as Diem failed to remedy the situation through negotiations while simultaneously being unable to control the Communists. Hence, the US greenlighted a coup d'état by the ARVN, which resulted in the assassination of Diem and his younger brother Ngo Dinh Nhu on November 1, 1963, toppling the First Republic (Miller 2013; Shaw 2015; Tan 2019; Hammer 1987). The ensuing ruling ARVN military junta failed to devise a firm policy to democratize the political landscape. While coping with its political shortcomings, the ARVN also grappled with continued and harsh attacks from Southern Vietnamese Communists.⁵⁾ Replacing one totalitarian regime with another did nothing to help the US effectively implement an anti-communism policy in Vietnam. Thereby, US President Johnson focused on the "More Flags" Campaign, which invited alliance troops to escalate the war and achieve a decisive victory over the Communists in Vietnam. Simultaneously, Johnson placed his confidence in Nguyen Van Thieu, a lieutenant general of the ARVN, amplifying his voice in the political arena. With US support, Thieu became the President of the Second Republic of Vietnam in 1967 through a general election (Veith 2021), concluding the military junta's reign.

Thieu immediately recognized the need to seek new friends to avoid an overwhelming dependence on aid from the US and its allies. Hence, the RVN modified its foreign policies to stress the importance of Southeast Asian countries and the region as a whole, particularly in light of the decision of the US and its allies to withdraw in the wake of the 1968 Tet Offensive. With the establishment of ASEAN, it was a propitious time for RVN to shape a notion of regionalism and regional power.

The rampant development of communism, together with the involvement of Allied troops in Vietnam, put Southeast Asia on alert. Dynamics in the region became more complex owing to an unforeseeable change in the relations between two great powers. The ferocious war between partners of the US and the Communists peaked during 1965–67. Allied troops conducted large-scale marches to stop Communist expansion; simultaneously, bombing campaigns were applied to break the Ho Chi Minh trail, which was

5) By then, also known as the Vietcong.

instrumental in breeding Southern Communists to resist the power of the US and its allies. Shortly after the Tet Offensive, the US deliberated over a new strategy to extricate its troops from Vietnam. Concurrently, the Sino-America détente became a mainstream of politics in the Asia-Pacific as the Nixon administration pivoted to isolating large-scale military attacks of North Vietnamese Communists following US withdrawal. Thanks to the ongoing attempts of Zhou En Lai, the PRC de-escalated tension with the US and the two powers signed a joint communique in Shanghai in 1972 (Garver 2015; Kissinger 1994). The normalization of US-PRC relations also featured a major revision of Southeast Asia's foreign policy. While a few states consistently supported the US presence in Southeast Asia to defeat communism, others placed their faith in the PRC. Ngoei Wen-Qing (2019) argues that the PRC was a critical factor in shaping the new foreign policy of ASEAN. While making a lingering case for US involvement as a means to squelch a simmering movement of Malaysian Communists (Newsinger 2013), ASEAN states firmly rejected PRC hegemony in Southeast Asia owing to ill-will toward conflict and China's ambition to monopolize the region and the South China Sea (Ngoei 2019, 301). This stance was further revised following the withdrawal of the US. The government of Indonesia fully accepted the PRC in Southeast Asia in line with the pro-Communist policy of Sukarno, which triggered the 1965–66 Indonesian genocide (Mehr 2009). The rising power of the PRC and the decreasing role of the US in Southeast Asia challenged ASEAN's efforts to gain diplomatic recognition from and cultivate a cordial bilateral relationship with the PRC.

III The Location of ASEAN in the RVN's Foreign Policy

The importance of regional cooperation was an influential feature of RVN foreign policy from the start. South Vietnamese politicians of both the First and the Second Republic made efforts to engage with regional actors on security objectives to contain communism and achieve prosperous development in Southeast Asia (Trần Nam Tiến 2015, 19–29). As soon as he became president, Ngo Dinh Diem highlighted the role of Southeast Asia and neighboring countries in his foreign policy (HDQNCM, Folder 150, Box 23 1965, 2), but he was not able to foster organic relationships with Thailand and the Philippines through the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization, or SEATO (DICH, Folder 1446 1956).⁶⁾

6) The Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) was established in 1955 for the collective defense of Southeast Asia. The members were Australia, France, New Zealand, Pakistan, the Philippines, Thailand, the United Kingdom, and the United States. South Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia were non-members protected by SEATO. The organization was disbanded in 1977.

Henderson and Fishel (1966) argue that the RVN's foreign relations during Diem's tenure failed to expand diplomatic ties or earn international support. In Indochina, Diem's relations with Laos and Cambodia remained cool due to the unclear anti-communism policy of those two states (Trần Nam Tiến 2015, 23; 2020, 120–123). From 1963 to 1965, the growing US and allied troop involvement in South Vietnam included Thailand, the Philippines, Australia, New Zealand, and South Korea, which significantly influenced the RVN's foreign policy. This not only included tightening anti-Communist military cooperation, but also promoting civic cooperation to win the war and achieve a prosperous Vietnam. The role of SEATO was paramount to guarantee the interests of the RVN and to address its nagging concerns about higher level political and military upheavals in South Vietnam. Despite the partnership with SEATO, South Vietnamese diplomats continued to stress the role of a non-military regional cooperation mechanism to de-escalate the conflict. Thanks to the SEATO and a shared vision of anti-communism, the RVN forged ties with Malaysia, the Philippines, and Thailand (BCC, Folder 446 1967, 2).

The foreign relations of the Second RVN became more dynamic owing to a concrete foreign policy that encompassed several categories of diplomacy. Prior to the establishment of ASEAN, South Vietnamese diplomats had already advocated for regional cooperation, as the RVN benefitted both from the support of overseas Vietnamese communities and platforms from which to advocate for and gain international backing. In 1966, Thieu and Ky appealed to other countries for support at the Manila Conference and attempted to join international organizations as full members (PTTg, Folder 20347, Box 23 1966, 6).⁷⁾ On October 25, 1966, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was specially tasked to galvanize the RVN's international relations and gain support of partners, demonstrating a deepening desire to engage with international and regional organizations. South Vietnamese diplomats affirmed the primacy of expanding a tactical presence in international environments to increase the RVN's prestige (BCC, Folder 446 1967, 2). When summarizing their strategy, South Vietnamese diplomats consistently focused on foreign relation development with the motto "more friends, fewer enemies," and reinforced alliances to earn international diplomatic support. Amid this strategy, Southeast Asian states caught the attention of South Vietnamese diplomats as a means to boost the RVN's profile in the region and beyond (BCC, Folder 446 1968, 7).

The establishment of ASEAN in 1967 was undoubtedly significant to the RVN as the newly elected president ruminated over a policy to bolster the republic's strategic presence and development in Southeast Asia. While tackling domestic fatigue caused by

7) As of 1966, the RVN had become a member of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the International Bank (IB), and the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO), among other organizations.

North Vietnamese Communists and domestic dissidents, South Vietnamese diplomats recognized the potential of Southeast Asian countries to weaken the position of the DRV in the North. In 1968, Tran Chanh Thanh⁸⁾ concretized the RVN's foreign policy to elevate its position internationally. The RVN attempted to join additional international entities, non-governmental organizations, and social groups to enlist support and multilateral cooperation. Simultaneously, the RVN established bilateral relations with Cambodia, Indonesia, and African countries, and gained a strategic presence in Middle Asia, Central Arica, Eastern Africa, Northern Europe, South America, France, Cambodia, and Indonesia (DIICH, Folder 7436 1968, 2). This was a far-reaching approach of the government to cope with Communist advances and the results reflect the significance of the RVN's foreign relations tactics.

South Vietnamese diplomats saw the establishment of ASEAN as a fertile ground for helping to build a peaceful, economically and politically stable South Vietnam upon the RVN gaining membership, as the regional organization pledged to cooperate in economic, cultural, and social affairs (DIICH, Folder 1681 1969a, 14). Acutely aware that the densely populated region would necessarily drive market demand and thus economic growth, the South Vietnamese deemed ASEAN as a new source of regional support in place of long-term aid from the US (DIICH, Folder 1681 1969a, 17). South Vietnamese diplomats sought economic cooperation and humanitarian aid from ASEAN members through deeper engagement with former allied countries, such as Thailand and the Philippines, and benefited from these ties. These attempts by RVN have been neglected by conventional historiography, as the tremendous volume of research on early phases of the Vietnam War and post-Vietnam War in the US and Vietnam cast the RVN as a client of US foreign policy. These RVN attempts also run counter to the narrative of some historians that the RVN held a subordinate diplomatic position as they demonstrate that the RVN raised its own profile amid the flaming conflict, asserting its eagerness to join ASEAN (DIICH, Folder 1681 1969a, 17).

Regional cooperation loomed larged, as the regional dialogue mechanism of ASEAN not only presented a new norm, but also helped shape the RVN's nation building plans. Through the prism of ASEAN, the RVN could liken its anti-Communist national development goals to contributions to the region and thus seek foreign aid in that vein. Prior to the formation of ASEAN, peace restoration and regional prosperity were central to RVN's home and foreign policy, thus the timing was ripe for the RVN when the association was established on August 8, 1967.

8) Tran Chanh Thanh (1917–75) was a South Vietnamese diplomat and politician who served as the Minister of Information in Diem's administration and as the Minister of Foreign Affairs in Thieu's administration.

III-1 *Phase 1: RVN-ASEAN Engagement for Mutual Benefit (1967–1972)*

As soon as ASEAN was established in August 1967, South Vietnamese diplomats devised a comprehensive policy to earn the organization's support, creating an information campaign to deepen understanding of the RVN's anti-communism efforts in the regional security sphere. Under the cloud of the Cold War, the birth of the ASEAN illustrated a concerted effort of members to stem the rapidly expanding war in Vietnam and the Indochina peninsula. Demonstrating insight, ASEAN members invited the engagement of external countries to elevate the Association's position in international relations (ASEAN 1967). Initially, ASEAN prioritized far-reaching economic cooperation. Nevertheless, the inclusion of cultural and social aspects emerged as a new concept to bind a multifaceted Southeast Asia based on cohesion and equality (DIICH, Folder 1613 1968, 2). South Vietnamese diplomats argued that ASEAN members yearned for Southeast Asia's economic well-being and prosperity, not a military ally, thus distinguishing ASEAN from SEATO. The RVN expected ASEAN to help facilitate its expanded presence in Southeast Asia, thus counterbalancing the DRV in the realm of international relations. It was also hoped that ASEAN, in recognizing the legitimacy of the RVN, would help foster further relationships with new partners in Southeast Asia. Owing to a "shared culture" in Southeast Asia, people-to-people contact was floated as a new idea for South Vietnamese diplomats to tighten the RVN's relationship with ASEAN and implement the RVN's overseas Vietnamese community policy (BCC, Folder 446 1968, 1).

The RVN's new foreign policy aimed to restore peace and aligned with the major aims of ASEAN. After one year of Allied troop involvement, Nguyen Van Thieu proposed lessening tensions in his country by removing external forces in 1966. He also diversified diplomacy efforts to amplify civic cooperation, information campaigns, and peace efforts while concentrating on the Southeast Asian milieu to address domestic fatigue (BCC, Folder 446 1967, 2). Thieu's vision was of a peaceful Southeast Asia absent of communism.

III-1-1 RVN Participation in ASEAN Events

Within a year of his inauguration (in January 1969), US President Nixon restored a clear presence of the ARVN and announced a conclusion to US intervention in the Vietnam War. This did not spark a revision in the RVN's foreign policy, which had already emphasized regional cooperation and support. Hence, the withdrawal of allied troops offered an opportunity to further engage with ASEAN to end the war and conflicts in the region. In December 1969, ASEAN was eager to acknowledge the RVN at its Annual Ministerial Meeting (AMM) in the Cameron Highlands of Malaysia. Tran Van Lam, the RVN's Minister of Foreign Affairs, led the RVN delegation together with Ta Thai

Buu, the RVN's Minister of Asia Pacific Affairs and Ngo Khac Thieu, Pham Kim Ngoc, the RVN's Minister of Economics. At the meeting, South Vietnamese diplomats supported collaboration among ASEAN members, agreeing with the proclamation of Carlos P. Romulo, the head of the Philippines delegation, that a coherent ASEAN policy was needed to strengthen solidarity for regional economic well-being and to establish a common ASEAN market. Thanat Khoman, the Thai foreign minister, sought genuine peace in Southeast Asia by normalizing diplomatic relations and coalescing economic well-being in lieu of withstanding a norm of anti-communism. The Indonesian representative proposed membership for the RVN and Laos to the ASEAN Chairman (DIICH, Folder 1681 1969c, 12). Malaysia also vigorously supported a larger role for the RVN in ASEAN (DIICH, Folder 1681 1969c, 19). South Vietnamese diplomats organized a series of amicable conversations on the sidelines of the conference, lobbying ASEAN politicians to recognize the RVN government and its intentions as legitimate for deescalating the war and restoring the region to a sustainable level of development after the war.

Through these exchanges at the 1969 ASEAN Ministerial Meeting (DIICH, Folder 1681 1969a, 19), a perception of peacebuilding and regionalization was created. ASEAN members reaffirmed their objectives and took a balanced approach to investigate the post-war policy of both the DRV and the RVN as US troops pulled out across the south of Vietnam. When the Nixon Doctrine⁹⁾ was announced in 1969, Thieu was focused on the objectives of national reconstruction and irredentism. It was believed that the participation of the RVN in ASEAN would stimulate multilateralism and present a wide range of regional projects to develop relations among ASEAN members. The 1969 AMM heralded South Vietnam as a budding diplomatic actor in ASEAN regardless of its status as an observer. At the closing ceremony, Lam declared that if the RVN was offered full membership, it would conform to the aims and objectives of the Association (DIICH, Folder 1681 1969b, 1). Despite an about-face in the foreign policies of the allies, integration into Southeast Asia was an insightful of RVN policies.

At the AMM, South Vietnamese diplomats promoted the idea of peacebuilding in Southeast Asia. They provided a greater flow of information regarding the future of the RVN after the withdrawal of external forces, promoting further development of Southeast Asia in the future. They demonstrated a commitment to the incremental progress of peace in Southeast Asia via the multilateral and bilateral mechanisms of ASEAN. Owing

9) In 1969 Nixon declared that "the United States would assist in the defense and developments of allies and friends," but would not "undertake all the defense of the free nations of the world." This meant that each ally nation was in charge of its own security. The Doctrine argued for the pursuit of peace through a partnership with American allies. For the RVN, this marked an all-out withdrawal of the US and allied troops and left the ARVN to fight against the DRV, the PRG in an atmosphere of domestic social fatigue.

to the appeal of ASEAN, South Vietnamese diplomats decided to engage with ASEAN members to benefit the RVN political clout. It marked a breakthrough in the RVN's diplomacy, firmly planting the idea that regional cooperation could be useful for economic and political leverage.

The RVN would take on greater responsibility in defusing the hostility of Communists and creating a healthy political climate in Southeast Asia. According to the assessment of South Vietnamese diplomats, the 1969 AMM and other ASEAN meetings in that year were immensely useful in helping the RVN adapt to changing US foreign policy and position itself in Southeast Asia. The AMM meeting also marked the RVN's alignment with ASEAN's approach to peace and development (DIICH, Folder 1681 1969b, 14) and the RVN became a front-running candidate for ASEAN membership. The 1969 AMM was a litmus test of the RVN's ability to survive the Nixon Doctrine and preempt the Communists' own strategic angling in Southeast Asia. South Vietnamese diplomats firmly believed in their tactical alliance with Thailand and the Philippines in their showdown with the Communists. The new foreign policy of the RVN was proving successful in response to the reduction of US and alliance troops in Southeast Asia.

While ASEAN focused on creating a multilateral platform, the prospect of the war ending and peace restoration in Southeast Asia accelerated the regionalization process, opening avenues for possible civic and economic cooperation, humanitarian aid, and the mutual development of ASEAN members.

III-1-2 RVN Relationships with Specific ASEAN Members

Two founding members of ASEAN, namely Thailand and the Philippines, were particularly important to RVN's engagement with ASEAN, often advocating for more RVN involvement in the Association. Although Hanoi had established bilateral ties with Indonesia in 1965, this did not deter Saigon's efforts to be a part of ASEAN and Southeast Asia's developmental trajectory. Based on the archived documents, I found that South Vietnamese diplomats eagerly designed a scheme to elevate diplomatic relations with Indonesia and successfully established Saigon-Jakarta contact. To strengthen relations, South Vietnamese diplomats formed a Department of Commerce and Information in Jakarta and increased the number of bilateral visits and ambassadorial level diplomacy in 1969 (DIICH, Folder 1681 1969a, 19). Indonesia was critical for the RVN's ASEAN membership bid, and the diplomatic efforts of the RVN closed the door of ill-will with a promise of a Saigon-Jakarta amity.

Conversely, an official relationship with Singapore proved unsuccessful owing to the island nation's half-hearted acknowledgement of the RVN's desire to become an official member of ASEAN. While complimenting the RVN for development gains under the

reign of Diem, Singapore's leader Lee Kuan Yew at first reversed Singapore's nonchalant stance to expressing goodwill for a proposal from Lam that Singapore would establish a commercial relationship with South Vietnam in 1969. Although there is a modicum of scholarly research regarding Singapore's position on the RVN, Ang Cheng Guan (2009) insists that, with the overwhelming support of the PRC, Singapore backtracked its diplomatic relations with the US and revised its policy toward South Vietnam when the Nixon administration began "concluding" the conflict in Indochina. In the context of the Sino-America détente, the Singaporean authorities maintained a cautious stance toward the war in Vietnam, reserving itself to muted comments.

Despite the challenges presented by bilateral relations, Lam optimistically expected that through solidarity among the nations of Southeast Asia, concerted efforts would be made to reduce hunger and other social ills in the region. These expectations were fueled by a joint communique with ASEAN members to boost RVN's reputation in a developing future of Southeast Asia (DIICH, Folder 1681 1969d, 2). This put the RVN one step closer to cooperation in economic and cultural fields. The ability of ASEAN to sustain commercial activity and economic growth was viewed as critical for the reconstruction of the country after the 1968 Tet Offensive, not to mention its pragmatic benefits vis-à-vis the increasing Vietnamization of the war. Therefore the RVN's approach had the potential to fulfill two objectives: winning the war and building up the country.

Thanks to the RVN's new foreign policy and the Nixon Doctrine, South Vietnamese diplomats continued to gain a voice in ASEAN. Though being cast as a client of the US and lampooned as a lackey government by Hanoi, the foreign policy of Thieu proved veracious in its attempts to integrate into ASEAN instead of simply relying on the US and its allies. Facing political turmoil at home and diminished international support due to the Sino-American rapprochement, Thieu was sensible to pivot to Southeast Asia, which held promise for the future of the RVN. However, Thieu's policy and the diplomatic history of the RVN was yoked by the changing international political landscape, which also influenced the development of ASEAN and the history of Southeast Asia.

III-1-3 RVN Advocacy Efforts

While significantly increasing engagement with ASEAN and ASEAN member states, South Vietnamese diplomats sustained a steady campaign of information dissemination and people-to-people contact. In late 1966, efforts by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs demonstrated the scale of the "information campaign" in a flurry of diplomacy. The RVN benefited from diplomatic attacks to counter its enemies' propaganda and sought to consolidate control over spreading its own message across the globe at speed (BCC, Folder 446 1967, 3). Hence, South Vietnamese diplomats coveted participation in ASEAN

information and cultural activity when ASEAN members reached a consensus in the mass communications and culture field at the Ministerial meeting of ASEAN members in Kuala Lumpur in November 1969. Witt Siwasariyanond, the head of the Thai delegation at the meeting, designed an ASEAN policy of cultural diplomacy, which focused on the role of newspapers, films, and theater in ASEAN cultural activity (PTTg, Folder 291 1969a, 1). The Malaysia delegation proposed annual seminars on the mass media and public diplomacy to alleviate the wounds of conflicts and to enhance mutual understanding among ASEAN members. Underscoring the significance of people-to-people contact, South Vietnamese diplomats broached a discussion of cultural exchanges among ASEAN and other peoples to strengthen cultural links and to facilitate a deepening engagement between ASEAN and other countries. With the advantage of developed domestic visual arts, the South Vietnamese occupied the role of film broadcast and exchanges. They argued that cultural events were a rewarding opportunity to promote the national culture through art and musical performances, which would link Vietnam's identities to Southeast Asian culture and ASEAN (PTTg, Folder 291 1969b, 2). Truong Quang Gia, the head of the Culture and Information Division of the RVN's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, acknowledged that the RVN involvement in ASEAN would create a formidable opportunity for his country to reinforce the notion of regionalism and enhance multilateral relationships.

III-1-4 Continued Engagement in 1970–71

Although facing harsher attacks from Communists across South Vietnam in the following years, diplomatic activity between the RVN and ASEAN continued at pace. On January 22, 1970, Carlos P. Romolo, the Philippines Minister of Foreign Affairs, submitted a proposal to the ASEAN Chairman that the Association grant honorary membership to the RVN.¹⁰ Romolo thought that the RVN was critical to ASEAN's peace-building efforts in Southeast Asia. This advocacy from the Philippines boosted South Vietnam's ability to rally for a collective effort with ASEAN in the juggernaut of the war and for regional economic reconstruction. Lam and his colleagues sought to be on good terms with ASEAN members, consistently staying focused on stymying the Communists and their expansionist goals in Cambodia and Laos. South Vietnamese diplomats saw ASEAN as critical to counter information from the DRV and the PRG. South Vietnamese diplomats implied that the RVN could use ASEAN for its own goals and fully subscribed to the idea and objectives of regional cooperation for a better life for South Vietnamese people and for ASEAN's prosperity and freedom (DIICH, Folder 1759 1970, 1–2).

Confronted with a series of impetuous Communist attacks on the border as well as

10) Lam carried out some correspondence with Romolo to encourage and express gratitude for his efforts.

the Sino-American détente, South Vietnamese diplomats continued to believe that regional cooperation could curb communism and achieve a peaceful Southeast Asia. At the 6th ASPAC Ministerial Meeting on July 14, 1971, in Manila, the Philippines, Lam voiced his concerns over DRV incursions in Laos and Cambodia (DIICH, Folder 1849 1971, 2). In March 1971, the ARVN had clashed with Communists along the border with the Lao Kingdom in the Lam Son 719 Campaign. The involvement of RVN in Lao's battlefields in this offensive aimed to subdue the Pathet Lao, the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN), and denunciations from Hanoi. Lam asserted the ARVN could keep communism at bay in Southeast Asia (DIICH, Folder 1849 1971, 2). At the Manila meeting, South Vietnamese diplomats urged ASEAN to operate as a stronger mechanism for economic cooperation and reiterated their fervent belief in peaceful coexistence and regional collaboration. Invited parties showed overwhelming support for RVN's foreign policies and encouraged it to maintain its strategic anti-Communist role in Southeast Asia.

The RVN's proposals for peace continued to receive ample attention from ASEAN from 1971 to 1972 as the retraction of US and alliance troops in the Vietnam War placated domestic and international grievances. An approach of neutrality lies at the heart of ASEAN conversations during this time. A debate on the disarmament of the Indochinese peninsula was central to the ASEAN Ambassadorial Summit of ASEAN during November 25–27, 1971, where its Declaration on the Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality (ZOPFAN) was adopted a Joint Implementation Committee (PTTg, Folder 20734 1971, 8) established. South Vietnamese diplomats disagreed with the zone, despite a consensus from the US and former allies of South Vietnam. Thailand lobbied South Vietnamese diplomats to accept the idea, but they instead publicly rejected it, as it would force the RVN to pause its (military) anti-Communist efforts. The ZOPFAN Declaration did not portend well for anti-communism campaigns in Southeast Asian countries. In response, the RVN implemented a hardline policy to expand efforts against the DRV and Communists in Southeast Asia.

As the international order reshaped in the wake of the Sino-American rapprochement, anti-communism lost its position in ASEAN's foreign policy. In response to the neutral posture of ASEAN, Lam stated that Thieu appreciated the organization's suggestion, particularly in Southeast Asia, but the RVN would scrutinize it in advance. They viewed the DRV and PRG's ability to hold political sway over Southeast Asia as an urgent problem (PTTg, Folder 20734 1972). The RVN saw that the neutralization policy sought peace for Southeast Asia, but also recognized that it would invalidate anti-communism policy in Southeast Asia.

The declaration of a neutrality zone and other ASEAN actions during 1971–72

prioritized political stability over concerns about the spread of communism. This seemed to mark a transition to abandoning anti-communism in Southeast Asia completely. In a letter delivered to Lam on July 21, 1972, Adam Malik urged ASEAN members to accept the viewpoints of both sides and displayed a longing to broker peace and conclude the war with a ceasefire signed by both the DRV and the RVN. Accordingly, ASEAN members acknowledged the legitimacy of the DRV and the RVN rather than US involvement and the PRG: they did not politically acknowledge the PRG as a legitimate government at the Paris Peace Negotiations in 1972 and proposed hastening the end of the war through negotiations with both the RVN and the DRV (PTTg, Folder 20734 1972). The content of the negotiations was on par with the provisions of the Geneva Accords of 1954 and the ten principles of the Bandung Conference of 1955 (Ampiah, 2007; Finnane and McDougall 2010).¹¹⁾ ASEAN enthusiastically safeguard a healthy political climate in Southeast Asia. The withdrawal of the US and alliance troops opened a door for negotiation to end the war. ASEAN could play a vital role as a mediator to balance great powers and achieve an ultimate goal of regional development. Politically, ASEAN was unanimously perceived as a constellation of capitalist countries for economic and social links, which could present an obstacle to Communist advances. In essence, ASEAN still validated the RVN's foreign policies and collectively enhanced the solidarity of Southeast Asian countries in anti-communism campaigns.

By and large, 1967–72 marked a period of RVN involvement in ASEAN as Thieu's administration acclimatized to a new political landscape and pivoted to regionalism. In the wake of the success of the EEC, Southeast Asian nations established ASEAN to deal with regional affairs and intentionally build economic well-being based on a shared foundation of culture, history, and level of development instead of falling prey to political showdowns amid a simmering Cold War. As for the RVN, ASEAN represented a newly emergent entity that could help minimize its heavy dependence on US aid and offer it a legitimate position in Southeast Asia. However, becoming an official member of ASEAN proved challenging for the RVN as it grappled with more intensive Communist attacks and the changing foreign policies of the great powers, both of which ultimately determined its future.

III-2 *Phase II: Suspicion and Failure (1973–75)*

Throughout the evolution of the Paris peace negotiations, Thieu and his colleagues were unable to control covert talks between the DRV and the US. Thus, with the PAVN in

11) The 1955 Bandung Conference respected the self-determination rights of South Vietnamese people, which was consistent with the RVN delegation's opinions on the legitimacy of RVN as well as peace restoration at the Paris Peace Negotiations.

South Vietnam's territories, the RVN was forced to sign a premature agreement. The Paris Peace Accords left it to the Thieu administration to safeguard South Vietnamese territories from Communists, but provisions in the agreement were disadvantageous to the RVN future. Despite dealing with subsequent territorial and diplomatic challenges, the RVN persevered long enough to fulfill national reconstruction and a ceasefire in Indochina through its talks in the Paris Negotiations and at ASEAN meetings. As such, assistance from ASEAN members was critical to bolster the RVN, not least by helping it attain membership in the Association, which would provide it with economic and civic boosts. Nonetheless, South Vietnamese politicians also recognized that ASEAN was an embryonic organization and foreign aid still ranked as a top priority for ASEAN's developmental future. South Vietnamese politicians passionately believed that the dynamic market of South Vietnam would create a surge of economic recovery and growth. ASEAN investment was a key component of the RVN's economic strategy to integrate into the global market. But, due to PAVN attacks across the country, ASEAN members were hesitant to invest in this potential market. South Vietnamese economists recognized that ASEAN members were still developing countries, but noted that ASEAN prioritized internal development over outside help, as the trauma of the Cold War had made the future of ASEAN member states uncertain. While the ASEAN Fund offered some promise for the Southeast Asian economy, in an ASEAN meeting during April 2–3, 1973, Malaysia's representative Encil Yusoff Ariff disavowed the financial ability of ASEAN to provide economic aid for the RVN's reconstruction in the post-war period (PTTg, Folder 20857 1973, 1), arguing that South Vietnam's market was inaccessible and thus had a dim future within the regional economy (PTTg, Folder 20857 1973, 1). Thereby, the gap between ASEAN and the RVN widened and civic cooperation to help the RVN overcome its challenges and realize organic economic growth within the region became unachievable.

Although sympathetic to the RVN, ASEAN members engaged with and even secretly supported the DRV. ASEAN's foreign policy in the wake of the Paris Peace Accords was typical of the Sino-American *détente*, which frustrated RVN attempts to repel the spread of communism. Stepping out of the shadow of the US, the RVN attempted to craft its own international relationships. ASEAN had held promise as a staging ground to test the RVN's foreign policy. Yet, its actions after the Peace Accords crushed RVN's effort to cultivate a mutual understanding.

Although fully aware of ASEAN's stance, the RVN did not change its approach to ASEAN. In 1974, South Vietnamese diplomats projected the RVN as nation builders and rekindled relationships with former allies in order to minimize communism's impacts and deter violent escalation in the Indochina peninsula from PAVN offensives. Hence,

South Vietnamese diplomats expected to receive renewed attention from the US and new partners to block the DRV and PRG infringements into RVN territories (PTTg, Folder 20834 1974). While Thieu's foreign policy remained a worthy anti-Communist strategy and safeguarded a right of self-determination, Thieu and his colleagues failed to further pursue its ASEAN-centered foreign policy due to its shifting focus to the military fight against the DRV. Thieu and his colleagues begrudged how Communist influences colored Southeast Asia's political landscape and denigrated the RVN. The RVN had previously hoped for ASEAN membership; this hope was rapidly disappearing amid increasingly tokenistic words and frigid welcomes of ASEAN members. In May 1974, Adam Malik, Indonesia's Foreign Minister, neglected to invite the RVN to ASEAN's 7th Ministerial Summit, while extending a warm welcome to the DRV (PTTg, Folder 20357 1974, 2). While Malik argued that this would not ruin ASEAN's bilateral ties with the RVN, he acknowledged that the invitation gave the DRV an opportunity to deepen its involvement in ASEAN. Archival documents indicate that South Vietnamese diplomats lambasted Indonesia's neutral stance at this time, questioning their tacit recognition of the Parcel Islands as belonging to the PRC. They also decried the official appearance of the PRG at the 1974 Diplomatic Conference on Humanitarian Law. Even if ASEAN continued to nominally include the RVN in association activity, ultimately ASEAN's ostracization prevented the RVN from integrating into the regional milieu.

Although the political context in Vietnam seriously hindered the RVN's full ASEAN membership, South Vietnamese politicians took a piecemeal approach to ASEAN. Upon closer analysis, the RVN took its presence at the 7th Ministerial Summit in Jakarta in May 1974 seriously (PTTg, Folder 20357 1974, 5). Archived documents from 1974 reveal that Thailand and the Philippines continued to promote neighborly relations between the RVN and ASEAN and these two allies aimed to establish renewed partnerships to satisfy regional and RVN objectives. The two ASEAN members inflated the significance that the RVN would have to ASEAN's economic potential and post-war of Southeast Asia scenario. In a dispatch of a Malaysian delegate to the ASEAN Standing Committee meeting of 1974, ASEAN members stated that restoration of peace in Vietnam would spur Southeast Asia revival (PTTg, Folder 20357 1974, 5). The role of Vietnam in the ASEAN market was paramount to ASEAN members, who yearned for economic growth and tariff-free regional trade. Given the 1973 Energy Crisis, ASEAN questioned inviting outside support, fearing it may lead to exploitation of natural resources. In this context, the market economy of the RVN offered potential as part of a commercial web in Southeast Asia.

Despite this, and for the reasons mentioned above, from late 1974 to early 1975, the relationship between the RVN and ASEAN worsened. The RVN continued large-scale

attacks on Communists from the North and those in the South. This stymied the prospect of the RVN succeeding in its Southeast Asia integration policy. No information could be found in the archives regarding efforts to cooperate with ASEAN after 1974, as South Vietnamese leaders were forced to focus on survival on the battlefield. The prospect of membership in ASEAN rapidly disappeared as PAVN and PRG forces sparked political convulsions (Veith 2013). A foreseeable defeat from all-out attacks of the DRV, along with the dearth of aid and rising suspicion among former allies, forced South Vietnamese politicians to relinquish the idea of ASEAN membership. The decision to engage in the regional security sphere was shelved and dreams of rebuilding a vigorous South Vietnam were shattered by Communist advances and the reticence of ASEAN members to grant RVN official membership following the 1973 Paris Peace Accords. While consorting with Hanoi from 1973 to 1975, ASEAN members further revealed their stance toward Communist blocs by establishing bilateral relationships with the PRC in 1974 (Malaysia) and 1975 (Thailand and the Philippines) (Ang and Liow 2015). Although they advocated for ASEAN membership at every opportunity, South Vietnamese diplomats were unable to turn the sympathy of ASEAN members for anti-communism into an actionable result.

During the post-Paris Accords and implementation period, bilateral ties between the RVN and ASEAN dropped off. The rift originated from both internal and external factors. The Paris Accords marked a major revision in ASEAN states' policy toward the war, and some attempted to establish a relationship with the PRC. ASEAN appeased the vexation of the RVN only with tokenistic words and support, maintaining an observer role in the conflict between the DRV and the RVN from 1973 to 1975. The abandonment of aid from former RVN allies, including Thailand, the Philippines, and the US, led to political suspicion and cast doubt on the anti-communism strategy in Southeast Asia. ASEAN's new position plunged RVN's prospects into despair. In addition, PAVN and PRG attacks across South Vietnam and propaganda campaigns demanded RVN's focus away from ASEAN diplomacy. While the RVN had navigated its policy to achieve a special role in ASEAN, the changing international political landscape and PAVN assaults destroyed any hope of a dynamic development, or indeed a post-war future, for the RVN.

IV Conclusions

This paper investigated South Vietnamese diplomats' perceptions of ASEAN and its potential for an RVN-built road to peace and development following the withdrawal of US and allied troops in Vietnam. I argue that ASEAN was key to RVN foreign policy during 1967–72 and remained significant to the regime despite the 1973 Paris Peace Accords.

A scarcity of source materials has made this is an unknown stretch of Southeast Asian and RVN history. Examination of archival documents housed at the Vietnam National Archives Center II has provided new insights.

The ASEAN-RVN bilateral relationship proved mutually effective from the establishment of ASEAN until the Paris Peace Accords. South Vietnamese diplomats promoted the supremacy of regional dialogue to elevate the role and prestige of the RVN in Southeast Asia. They distinguished the Association from a military or political counterpart to create a peaceful space in Southeast Asia in which to pursue economic development plans, thus demonstrating its goodwill toward fostering a robust version of the ASEAN community. The RVN raised its status in Southeast Asia and proposed initiatives to build a solid ASEAN with its full membership. In spite of being an official observer at ASEAN summits, South Vietnamese diplomats took advantage of these forums to convey their viewpoints to ASEAN members. The actions of the RVN contributed to a political dynamism in Southeast Asia during an emerging period of peace and development in the region.

The Paris Accords of 1973 dissolved a bipolar world order with a Sino-American détente, causing an about-face in the positions of Southeast Asian nations. The rapprochement, in conjunction with a new inaccessibility of ASEAN, made the RVN question whether anti-communism was still a top priority of ASEAN members. While the US retracted aid and coerced the RVN into sanctioning the Paris Accords, the expansionist goal of the PRC in the Paracel Islands and impetuous attacks of the PAVN and the PRG locked all doors to the RVN's membership in ASEAN. Subsequent changes in foreign policies of ASEAN members and great powers ruined all chance of the RVN becoming a critical part of ASEAN, thus ending a chapter in Southeast Asia's regionalism.

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