

PERSPECTIVE

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Flying the ASEAN Flag in a Pandemic Year: Vietnam's 2020 Chairmanship

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Vietnam has leveraged digital diplomacy to keep the ASEAN agenda progressing despite the COVID-19 disruptions. A number of ASEAN pandemic response initiatives have been launched but their on-the-ground impact is yet to be seen.
- As US-China rivalry deepens, ASEAN has reaffirmed its neutrality anchored in international law and an open and inclusive regional order.
- ASEAN has demonstrated its centrality in the regional trade architecture through the conclusion of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP).
- Vietnam has sought to embed Mekong Basin issues in the ASEAN agenda, and strengthen ASEAN's position on the South China Sea by emphasising the primacy and universal application of the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea.
- Vietnam's success in pandemic control and smooth conduct of the ASEAN Chairmanship this year have elevated the country's international standing and strategic importance in the Indo-Pacific.

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INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic is a paramount test of ASEAN's resilience and Vietnam's ability to lead as the ASEAN Chair in 2020.¹ While many ASEAN member states (AMS) remain preoccupied with containing the virus or embroiled in political-social turmoil and economic depression, Vietnam has effectively brought the pandemic under control² and is projected to record economic growth at 1.8% this year.³ Vietnam therefore has a greater bandwidth to focus on the ASEAN agenda and fulfill its chairmanship responsibility. It has utilised digital diplomacy to maintain the momentum of ASEAN dialogue and cooperation. All ASEAN meetings, including those with its Dialogue Partners, have been held virtually since April 2020.

The pandemic has amplified and accelerated systemic shifts in the region, especially the intensification of US-China rivalry and the diversification of global supply chains to reduce over-dependency on China. The stakes are particularly high for Vietnam to leverage these strategic and economic shifts to its interests and to build a "Cohesive and Responsive ASEAN" in parallel. This article examines the key challenges and achievements of Vietnam's ASEAN chairmanship, and how Vietnam has transposed its national interests into the regional agenda. The scope of examination focuses on three aspects: handling the COVID-19 pandemic; managing great power competition; and navigating the contested waters in the South China Sea (SCS) and the Mekong.

HANDLING THE PANDEMIC

Since late January 2020, ASEAN defence, foreign affairs and health sectors had committed to regional coordination in tackling COVID-19⁴ even though actual collective response was limited on the ground. ASEAN was under criticism for being missing in action when AMS scrambled to close their borders and imposed export restrictions of essential supplies in the early days of the pandemic. In retrospect, much of the criticism was undue, especially given the World Health Organisation's reluctance to declare COVID-19 a public health emergency of international concern (PHEIC) until 30 January. AMS initially had different risk assessments of COVID-19, entered the pandemic at different starting points, and are now in different stages of pandemic control. COVID-19 brought home the role of the state as first responder and ultimate bearer of responsibility for its population in public health emergencies, especially one with such a global magnitude and unpredictable trajectory as COVID-19.

ASEAN has since stepped up to its plate and rolled out some collective response initiatives, including the COVID-19 ASEAN Response Fund (CARF) and the ASEAN Regional Reserve of Medical Supplies for Public Health Emergencies (RRMS). These initiatives helped raise the ASEAN flag but their practical impact remains to be seen. AMS' contributions to the CARF and the RRMS are on a voluntary basis, and their amounts committed to the CARF quite limited (Table 1). Both have not been activated on the ground yet.

Table 1: Estimated Contributions to the ASEAN Covid-19 Response Fund⁵

Sources of contribution	Amount
10% withdrawal from the ASEAN Development Fund (ADF)	USD1.3 million (est.)
Voluntary contributions by AMS	USD100,000 (Singapore) USD100,000 (Thailand) USD100,000 (Vietnam)
10% withdrawal from the ASEAN Plus Three Cooperation Fund	USD300,000 (est.)
Pledged contributions by Dialogue Partners	USD1 million (China) USD1 million (ROK) USD1 million (Japan) USD1 million (New Zealand) AUD1 million (Australia)

Additionally, ASEAN is working on regional standard operating procedures (SOP) for public health emergencies. In November, the ASEAN leaders issued a declaration on developing an ASEAN travel corridor arrangement framework.⁶ Despite this declaration of intent, an ASEAN-wide travel bubble is very difficult to implement at this stage, given the different phases of pandemic in AMS. The leaders also adopted the ASEAN Comprehensive Recovery Framework⁷ and its Implementation Plan⁸ with specific outputs and deliverables for follow-up by relevant ASEAN sectors.

On the economic front, the pandemic has incentivised AMS to accelerate the roll-out of the ASEAN Single Window and the adoption of an electronic certificate of origin to overcome COVID-19 trade disruptions. The First Protocol to amend the ASEAN Trade in Goods Agreement (ATIGA) entered into force in September 2020, allowing the acceptance of e-signature/seal.⁹ In November, the computerised ASEAN Customs Transit System involving Cambodia, Laos, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam was launched, under which “traders can carry out a single transit journey across participating AMS via a single truck, single customs declaration and single banker's guarantee.”¹⁰

ASEAN has achieved good results in minimising and rolling back restrictive trade measures on essential goods and medical supplies. In April 2020, the ASEAN ministers on agriculture and forestry undertook to minimise disruptions in regional food supply chains, keep markets open and facilitate transportation of agricultural and food products.¹¹ In June, the ASEAN leaders committed to ensure the smooth flow of essential goods, including food, medicines, and medical and other COVID-19 related essential supplies.¹² In November, AMS signed the Memorandum of Understanding on the Implementation of Non-Tariff Measures on Essential Goods with immediate effect, committing to refrain from “imposing restrictive trade measures on essential goods and supplies” and “rolling back all NTMs on essential goods that are not in conformity with the WTO Agreement.”¹³ The ATIGA process has been following up on these commitments and some AMS have lifted their temporary export restrictions (Table 2). Although ASEAN was but a contributing factor to this rollback, its efforts to keep supply chain connectivity in essential supplies represent one of the most tangible ASEAN pandemic responses this year.

Table 2: COVID-19 Export Restrictions by ASEAN Member States¹⁴

Country	COVID-19 Trade Measures	Start Date	End Date
Cambodia	Export prohibition of rice and fish	05/04/2020	20/05/2020
	Export prohibition of masks	30/03/2020	04/05/2020
Indonesia	Export prohibition of raw materials for masks, PPE and other products.	31/03/2020	30/06/2020
Myanmar	Export prohibition of rice	03/04/2020	01/05/2020
Malaysia	Export prohibition of masks	07/03/2020	Still active
Philippines	Export prohibition of rice	27/03/2020	Still active
Thailand	Export prohibition of eggs	26/03/2020	30/04/2020
	Export prohibition of masks	05/02/2020	Still active
Vietnam	Export licences for medical masks	11/03/2020	29/04/2020
	Export prohibition of pharmaceutical products	14/04/2020	07/05/2020
	Rice export quotas	25/03/2020	01/05/2020

ASEAN has also reached out to its Dialogue Partners to secure their support in combating the pandemic and in facilitating economic recovery (Table 3). Beyond these practical needs, the political message from these engagements is equally important, namely to keep the spirit and practice of multilateralism alive and maintain an open and inclusive regional order.

Table 3: Support by Dialogue Partners to ASEAN Pandemic Response¹⁵

Dialogue Partners	Support for ASEAN in Pandemic Response
ASEAN Plus Three	10% contribution to the CARF Rice assistance from Japan and ROK to Myanmar under the ASEAN Plus Three Emergency Rice Reserve (APTERR)
Australia	AUD70 million for resilience and recovery in Southeast Asia Pledged AUD1 million to the CARF AUD80 million contribution to COVAX to help secure COVID-19 vaccines for Pacific Island and Southeast Asia (Indonesia, Timor-Leste, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, The Philippines and Vietnam)
Canada	690,000 items of PPE to Brunei, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Vietnam and the ASEAN Secretariat (valued at USD4.5 million)
China	Pledged USD1 million to the CARF Pledged support to the ASEAN RRMS upon its establishment USD5 million to support ASEAN-China public health cooperation Donation of medical supplies to the ASEAN Secretariat for COVID-19 prevention
The EU	“Team Europe” package of EUR800 million for the ASEAN region
ROK	Pledged USD1 million to the CARF

Dialogue Partners	Support for ASEAN in Pandemic Response
	USD5 million to enhance detection capacity of COVID-19 in AMS
Japan	Pledged USD50 million for the establishment of the ASEAN Centre for Public Health Emergencies and Emerging Diseases Centre (ASEAN CDC) Pledged USD1 million to the CARF COVID-19 Crisis Response Emergency Support Loans for individual AMS Initiative on Overseas Loan and Investment for ASEAN to revitalise the regional economy
New Zealand	USD12 million for efforts to control the pandemic, Pledged USD1 million for the CARF
US	USD87 million in emergency health and humanitarian assistance for AMS to combat COVID-19

MANAGING GREAT POWER RIVALRY

The COVID-19 pandemic has escalated US-China rivalry and contributed to rising tensions in China’s relations with Japan, India, Australia and the EU. Vietnam finds itself in both a sweet and hot spot amid these developments.

On the one hand, the Quad member countries attach increasing importance to Vietnam in their Indo-Pacific strategies through both enhanced bilateral relations and the Quad-plus engagements.¹⁶ Vietnam and Australia recently signed an action plan to implement their strategic partnership, and will work towards upgrading it to comprehensive strategic partnership.¹⁷ In October, Hanoi welcomed Japan’s new Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga in his first overseas mission, and US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, both of whom sought to strengthen relations with Vietnam as part of their broader Indo-Pacific alignments.¹⁸ Notably, the Quad members’ enhanced engagement with Vietnam is as much about economics as it is about security. Vietnam stands to benefit substantially from their supply chain resilience and quality infrastructure initiatives. It was reported in July 2020 that 15 out of the 30 Japanese companies receiving government relocation funding chose to move their factories from China to Vietnam.¹⁹

Apart from its bilateral and minilateral engagements with the Quad members, Vietnam is among the most forward-leaning members on the Indo-Pacific in ASEAN. As the country-coordinator of ASEAN-Japan relations, Vietnam contributed to the issuance of the Joint Statement on Cooperation on the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) at the ASEAN-Japan Summit in November, which noted that both the AOIP and Japan’s Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) “share relevant fundamental principles in promoting peace and cooperation.”²⁰

Conversely, Vietnam-China relations continue to be fraught with SCS disputes and incidents, including the sinking of a Vietnamese fishing boat in April 2020²¹ and Beijing's pressure on Hanoi and international oil companies to halt drilling activities in Vietnam's economic exclusive zones (EEZ).²² Many domestic and international surveys suggest a high level of trust in the US among the Vietnamese public and foreign policy elite, contrasted by their deep distrust of China.²³ That said, Vietnam's China strategy going forward continues to be a mix of hedging and balancing whereas bandwagoning against Beijing is off the table. Geographical proximity, power asymmetry, political affinity between the Vietnamese and Chinese communist parties, and Vietnam's economic dependency, all suggest the futility of a confrontational relationship with China, on top of the fear of abandonment by powers further afield, as experienced by both South and North Vietnam during the Cold War. Moreover, Vietnam's collective leadership system ensures internal check and balance against external bandwagoning with any single power.

ASEAN provides both a buffer and an anchor for Vietnam to exercise its omni-directional foreign policy and resist the pressures of a binary choice between the US and China. In August 2020, the ASEAN foreign ministers issued the Statement on the Importance of Maintaining Peace and Stability in Southeast Asia²⁴ which highlights ASEAN's "neutral" position in the great power competition. Vietnam's input to the Statement made sure that international law is the bedrock for the exercise of such neutrality, the moral compass that guides ASEAN amid the geopolitical turmoil. The Statement referred to the 1971 Declaration of Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality (ZOPFAN) but does not signal a return to ZOPFAN's historical proposition of "regional solutions to regional problems". Instead, it encouraged "the constructive engagement of ASEAN's external partners, through ASEAN-led mechanisms", reaffirming the "outward-looking, open and inclusive" DNA embraced by ASEAN after the Cold War.

ASEAN also provides avenues for Vietnam and other states to pursue inclusive multilateralism, hold the middle ground for cooperation and exercise their agency amid great power rivalry. ASEAN's "middle power moment" this year arrived with the signing of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) on 15 November. Even without India at the negotiating table, the trade talks were tough till the last minute, mainly because an India-minus RCEP is much less appealing in both economic and geopolitical terms. Japan, for instance, was most reluctant to sign the RCEP without India. As for Vietnam, the economic impact of the RCEP remains debatable, with a mixed bag of both potentials and challenges.²⁵ However, Hanoi had worked hard with other participating countries to conclude the RCEP, which attests to their strong commitment to open and free trade, and demonstrates the importance of ASEAN centrality in the regional trade architecture.

NAVIGATING CONTESTED WATERS

In 2020, China continued to assert its maritime claims and control in the SCS, including through survey ship operations in the EEZs of Vietnam and Malaysia, harassment of these countries' drilling operations, creation of two new administrative districts for the Paracels and Spratlys, and most recently draft legislation authorising the use of weapons against foreign ships by its coast guard.²⁶ Meanwhile, the US has adopted a hardline policy towards

Beijing, increasing the frequency of its freedom of navigation operations and ramping up its presence missions and naval exercises in the SCS.

Significant developments have also unfolded in the lawfare. Pompeo's statement on 13 July clarified US legal position on the maritime claims in the SCS, in line with the 2016 Arbitral Tribunal's ruling.²⁷ The US also joined a string of states – Malaysia, the Philippines, Vietnam, Australia, France, Germany and the UK – in submitting notes-verbales/letters to the UN, using UNCLOS as the legal basis to reject China's nine-dash line and maritime claims in the SCS.²⁸

Seizing upon the momentum of this international discourse, Vietnam has leveraged its ASEAN Chair position to emphasise the primacy and universal character of the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) in regulating behaviour and activities at sea. The chairman statements of the two regular ASEAN Summits this year and of ASEAN foreign minister and summit meetings with several Dialogue Partners, affirmed UNCLOS as “the basis for determining maritime entitlements, sovereign rights, jurisdiction and legitimate interests over maritime zones” and “the legal framework within which all activities in the oceans and seas must be carried out.”²⁹

However, Vietnam was unable to translate this position into ASEAN-wide consensus. Reference to UNCLOS was watered down in the Joint Communiqué of the 53rd ASEAN Foreign Ministers Meeting (AMM) in September since this negotiated document requires consensus of all AMS.³⁰ While continuing to leverage ASEAN for international mobilisation on the SCS, Hanoi seems clear-eyed about the constraints of ASEAN consensus decision-making and the acute deficit of ASEAN unity on this issue. Moving forward, Vietnam and other like-minded Southeast Asian states will need to look beyond ASEAN's minimalist common stance and work towards an ASEAN-minus coalition on the SCS. The note-verbale exchange at the UN offers new pathways for this unilateral approach. At the least, these states will need to build on their emerging convergence of legal positions and strategic outlooks to coordinate more closely in the negotiations on a code of conduct in the SCS (COC).

Alongside the SCS, the Mekong Basin has emerged as a hot spot of ecological catastrophe and an arena of major power contestation. In early 2020, Vietnam's Mekong Delta suffered a worst-hit drought and saltwater intrusion, partly attributable to upstream dams in Laos and China.³¹ The Eyes on Earth report in April 2020, which examined how China's upstream dams have altered the Mekong's natural flow, revealed that “the severe lack of water in the Lower Mekong during the wet seasons of 2019 is largely influenced by the restriction of water flowing from the Upper Mekong during that time.”³² As noted by Sebastian Strangio, “the geography of the Mekong river reflects the region's geopolitical hierarchy: a powerful China at the top and smaller, less developed nations below.”³³ So far, ASEAN has been mute on these developments and ASEAN's role in the area is largely marginal. Meanwhile, all major powers have intensified their involvement in the Mekong through many competing frameworks.³⁴

Vietnam has also actively brought the Mekong sub-region to the ASEAN agenda this year. Speaking at the ASEAN Forum on Converging Mekong Sub-regional Cooperation with ASEAN Goals in July, Vietnam's Minister of Trade and Industry Tran Tuan Anh and

Deputy Foreign Minister Nguyen Quoc Dzong emphasised the imperative for ASEAN to enhance its role and centrality in the Mekong sub-region, linking it with ASEAN community-building and sustainable development goals.³⁵ At Vietnam's initiative, the ASEAN Coordinating Council convened a special session on sub-regional development in September. The one-off meeting encouraged efforts to align "sub-regional growth with the comprehensive development of ASEAN" but failed to prescribe any concrete action to enhance ASEAN's role and strategic outlook on sub-regional cooperation frameworks. Furthermore, Hanoi's intended focus on the Mekong was somewhat diluted as there are many other sub-regional frameworks in the region.

Vietnam's efforts to embed the Mekong issues in ASEAN agenda and institutions have yielded limited progress due to the lack of ASEAN consensus. However, these efforts have generated wider interest and concern over the unfolding environmental catastrophe and community displacements in the Mekong Basin. Apart from the government sector, the media, academia and civil society have joined the discourse with extensive publications, productions and other activities that help impress the Mekong's plight onto the region's consciousness.³⁶

This year also saw increased attention to and mention of the Mekong issues in ASEAN meetings with some Dialogue Partners, especially the US, Japan and Australia. In September, the US upped the game by launching the Mekong-US Partnership with new aid injections.³⁷ Washington has become most vocal in criticising China's upstream dam operations and its withholding of upstream water.³⁸ In response to this criticism and to win back the positive narrative, China signed in October an agreement with the Mekong River Commission to share year-round data on the flow in China's portion of the river.³⁹ While regional states must tread carefully as the Mekong winds up in US-China rivalry, this experience suggests that having more players in the game and calling out for international attention does provide some leverage in dealing with China.

CONCLUSION

Apart from the above prevailing issues, Vietnam's ASEAN Chairmanship this year also discussed the community-building agenda, especially the review of the ASEAN Charter, mid-term reviews of the ASEAN Community 2025, and brainstorming on a post-2025 vision. However, the deliberations and deliverables thus far fall short of any substantive guidance on ASEAN's future directions.⁴⁰ As an example, the review of the ASEAN Charter, its scope yet to be determined, will likely end up as a bureaucratic exercise of identifying implementation gaps⁴¹ rather than a soul-searching on the ASEAN Way and whether it needs recalibration to remain relevant in today's world. For a "cohesive and responsive ASEAN", this issue needs to be squarely addressed going forward.

Vietnam's success in pandemic control and smooth conduct of ASEAN Chairmanship this year have helped elevate its international standing and strategic importance in the Indo-Pacific.⁴² The country is seen by many as an emerging new leader in ASEAN.⁴³ The Vietnamese leadership meanwhile increasingly adopts the ASEAN identity in their strategic outlook – their chairmanship motto being "Think Community, Act Community". Since a strong and united ASEAN is in the country's long-term strategic interests, Vietnam should

continue to invest in ASEAN beyond this year's chairmanship, preferably more in substance than in form, through thought leadership, initiative and the capacity to carry it through.

¹ As of 2 December 2020, the coronavirus has infected at least 1,200,382 people in Southeast Asia, and claimed 27,961 lives region-wide, according to John Hopkins University, <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/>.

² Vietnam registered 1351 COVID-19 cases and 35 deaths as of 2 December 2020, <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/>.

³ The Asian Development Bank, *Economic indicators for Viet Nam*, <https://www.adb.org/countries/viet-nam/economy>.

⁴ ASEAN Press Release, *ASEAN Health Sector responds to 2019 Novel Coronavirus threat*, 30 January 2020, <https://asean.org/asean-health-sector-responds-2019-novel-coronavirus-threat/>; Chairman's Statement on ASEAN Collective Response to the Outbreak of Coronavirus Disease 2019, 15 February 2020, <https://asean.org/storage/2020/02/ASEAN-Chairmans-Statement-on-COVID-19-FINAL.pdf>; Joint Statement by the ASEAN Defence Ministers on Defence Cooperation Against Disease Outbreaks, 19 February 2020, <https://asean.org/storage/2020/02/Joint-Statement-on-Disease-Outbreak-final-version.pdf>.

⁵ Compiled by authors from different sources.

⁶ ASEAN Declaration on an ASEAN Travel Corridor Arrangement Framework, 12 November 2020, <https://asean.org/asean-declaration-asean-travel-corridor-arrangement-framework/>.

⁷ ASEAN Comprehensive Recovery Framework, 12 November 2020, https://asean.org/storage/2020/11/2-FINAL-ACRF_adopted-37th-ASEAN-Summit_12112020.pdf.

⁸ Implementation Plan of ASEAN Comprehensive Recovery Framework, 12 November 2020, [3-FINAL-Implementation-Plan-ACRF_adopted-37th-ASEAN-Summit_12112020.pdf](https://asean.org/storage/2020/11/3-FINAL-Implementation-Plan-ACRF_adopted-37th-ASEAN-Summit_12112020.pdf).

⁹ Sithanonxay Suvannaphakdy and Anuthida Saelaow Qian, "ASEAN Single Window: From Paper-based to Paperless", *ASEANFocus*, September 2020, pp. 6-7, <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/ASEANFocus-September-2020.pdf>.

¹⁰ Singapore Ministry of Trade and Industry and Singapore Customs, Joint Media Release "Smoother cross-border transit movement of goods within Southeast Asia with the ASEAN Customs Transit System", <https://www.mti.gov.sg/-/media/MTI/Newsroom/Press-Releases/2020/11/Joint-Press-Release--Smoother-crossborder-transit-movement-of-goods-within-Southeast-Asia-with-the-A.pdf>. The participating ASEAN member states are Cambodia, Laos, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam.

¹¹ Statement of ASEAN Ministers on Agriculture and Forestry in Response to The Outbreak of The Coronavirus Disease (Covid-19) to Ensure Food Security, Food Safety and Nutrition in ASEAN, 14 April 2020, <https://asean.org/statement-asean-ministers-agriculture-forestry-response-outbreak-coronavirus-disease-covid-19-ensure-food-security-food-safety-nutrition-asean/>.

¹² Hanoi Plan of Action on Strengthening ASEAN Economic Cooperation and Supply Chain Connectivity in Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic, 19 June 2020, <https://asean.org/storage/2020/06/Hanoi-POA.pdf>.

¹³“ASEAN MOU on essential goods enters into force”, ASEAN Secretariat News, 13 November 2020 <https://asean.org/asean-mou-essential-goods-enters-force/>.

¹⁴ International Trade Centre, *Market Access Map - COVID-19 Temporary Trade Measures*, <https://www.macmap.org/covid19>.

¹⁵ Compiled by author from different sources.

¹⁶ Indrani Bagchi, “India, Quad-Plus countries discuss Covid-19 battle, economic resurgence”, *The Times of India*, 28 March 2020, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/India-Quad-Plus-countries-discuss-Covid-19-battle-economic-resurgence/articleshow/74861792.cms>.

¹⁷ “VN and Australia signs strategic partnership action plan”, Viet Nam News, 6 November 2020, <https://vietnamnews.vn/politics-laws/804329/vn-and-australia-signs-strategic-partnership-action-plan.html>.

¹⁸ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Vietnam, *Speech by Prime Minister Suga at the Vietnam-Japan University: Bring Together the Future of Indo-Pacific*, 19 October 2020, <https://vietnamnews.vn/politics-laws/804329/vn-and-australia-signs-strategic-partnership-action-plan.html>; US Department of State, *Secretary Michael R. Pompeo Travels to Vietnam to Demonstrate Support for a Strong, Prosperous, and Independent Vietnam*, 29 October 2020, <https://vn.usembassy.gov/secretary-pompeo-travels-to-vietnam-to-demonstrate-support-for-a-strong-prosperous-and-independent-vietnam/>.

¹⁹ Ngoc Thuy, “15 Japanese firms to leave China for Vietnam”, Hanoi Times, 20 July 2020, <http://hanoitimes.vn/15-japanese-firms-to-leave-china-for-vietnam-313333.html>.

²⁰ Joint Statement of the 23rd ASEAN-Japan Summit on Cooperation on ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific, <https://asean.org/storage/2020/11/17-Joint-Statement-of-the-23rd-ASEAN-Japan-Summit-on-Cooperation-on-ASEAN-O....pdf>.

²¹ Khanh Vu, “Vietnam protests Beijing’s sinking of South China Sea boat”, *Reuters*, 4 April 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-vietnam-china-southchinasea-idUSKBN21M072>.

²² James Gavin, “Vietnam battles for IOCs as China turns up the heat”, *Petroleum Economist*, 18 August 2020, <https://www.petroleum-economist.com/articles/upstream/exploration-production/2020/vietnam-battles-for-iocs-as-china-turns-up-the-heat>.

²³ Please see, among others, Tang, S. M. et. al., *The State of Southeast Asia: 2020* (Singapore: ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, 2020), https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/pdfs/TheStateofSEASurveyReport_2020.pdf; *Mapping the Future of U.S. China Policy: Views of US Thought Leaders, the US Public and US Allies and Partners*, Centre for Strategic & International Studies, 2020, <https://chinasurvey.csis.org>.

²⁴ ASEAN Foreign Ministers Statement on the Importance of Maintaining Peace and Stability in Southeast Asia, 8 August 2020, <https://asean.org/storage/2020/08/FINAL-ASEAN-FM-Statement-on-Peace-and-Stability-in-Southeast-Asia-Region-18.2.pdf>.

²⁵ The Assynt Report: Vietnam-RCEP agreement will boost regional trade, but limitations mean Hanoi will continue to pursue more comprehensive global pacts, 19 November 2020.

²⁶ Tsukasa Hadano, “China’s coast guard allowed to fire on foreign ships under new law”, *Nikkei Asia Review*, 6 November 2020, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/China-s-coast-guard-allowed-to-fire-on-foreign-ships-under-new-law#:~:text=China's%20coast%20guard%20allowed%20to%20fire%20on%20foreign%20ships%20under%20new%20law,-Japan%20fears%20legislation&text=The%20text%2C%20released%20Wednesday%20by,if%20warnings%20are%20not%20heeded>.

²⁷ US Department of State, Press Statement by Michael R. Pompeo, Secretary of State, *US Position on Maritime Claims in the South China Sea*, 13 July 2020, <https://www.state.gov/u-s-position-on-maritime-claims-in-the-south-china-sea/>.

²⁸ Letter by Kelly Craft, US Representative to the UN, to the United Nations Secretary-General, 1 June 2020, https://usun.usmission.gov/wp-content/uploads/sites/296/200602_KDC_ChinasUnlawful.pdf.

²⁹ This language was repeated or modified slightly in the chairman statements of ASEAN ministerial meetings with the US, India, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Japan, and the EU in September 2020, as well as ASEAN-India, ASEAN-Australia, ASEAN-Japan, ASEAN-US summits in November 2020.

³⁰ Joint Communiqué of the 53rd ASEAN Foreign Ministers Meeting (AMM), <https://asean.org/storage/2020/09/FINAL-Joint-Communique-of-the-53rd-AMM.pdf>.

³¹ Huu Khoa, “Mekong Delta hit by worst drought ever”, *Vnexpress.net*, 21 March 2020, <https://e.vnexpress.net/photo/news/mekong-delta-hit-by-worst-drought-ever-4071241.html>.

³² Basist, A. and Williams, C. (2020); Monitoring the Quantity of Water Flowing Through the Mekong Basin Through Natural (Unimpeded) Conditions, *Sustainable Infrastructure Partnership*, Bangkok.

³³ Sebastian Strangio, *In the Dragon’s Shadow*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2020), p. 59.

³⁴ These include the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC) led, the Lower Mekong Initiative (LMI) led by the US, the Mekong-Ganga Cooperation involving India, Mekong-ROK Cooperation, Mekong-Japan Cooperation, Japan-US Mekong Power Partnership (JUMPP).

³⁵ “Minister Tran Tuan Anh: Enhancing ASEAN’s role in sub-regional cooperation”, *Congthuong.vn*, 14 July 2020, <https://congthuong.vn/bo-truong-tran-tuan-anh-can-nang-cao-vai-tro-cua-asean-trong-hop-tac-tieu-vung-140383.html>.

³⁶ For example, the Mekong 2030 project by the Luang Prabang Film Festival (LPFF), which features five short, narrative films that envision the state of the Mekong River in 2030, to raise awareness on the issues affecting the river and its dependent communities, <https://www.asianfilmarchive.org/event-calendar/mekong-2030-1/>.

³⁷ Mekong-US Partnership Joint Ministerial Statement, 15 September 2020, [https://asean.usmission.gov/mekong-u-s-partnership-joint-ministerial-statement/#:~:text=The%20Mekong%2DU.S.%20Partnership%20\(hereafter,countries%20and%20the%20United%20States](https://asean.usmission.gov/mekong-u-s-partnership-joint-ministerial-statement/#:~:text=The%20Mekong%2DU.S.%20Partnership%20(hereafter,countries%20and%20the%20United%20States).

³⁸ US Mission to ASEAN, Remarks by Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo at the Special ASEAN- United States Foreign Ministers' Meeting on Coronavirus Disease, 22 April 2020, <https://asean.usmission.gov/the-united-states-and-asean-are-partnering-to-defeat-covid-19-build-long-term-resilience-and-support-economic-recovery/>.

³⁹ “China commits to share year-round water data with Mekong River Commission”, *Reuters*, 22 October 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mekong-river-idUSKBN277135>.

⁴⁰ Please see Ha Noi Declaration on The ASEAN Community’s Post-2025 Vision, 12 November, <https://asean.org/storage/2020/11/1-Final-Ha-Noi-Declaration-on-the-ASEAN-Communitys-Post-2025-Vision.pdf>.

⁴¹ Sharon Seah, “A Review of the ASEAN Charter: In the Fullness of Time”, *ISEAS Commentaries*, 18 September 2020, <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/media/commentaries/a-review-of-the-asean-charter-in-the-fullness-of-time/>.

⁴² Vietnam’s ranking in the Lowy Institute Asia Power Index 2020 Edition jumped to No.12 from last year No.13 with the biggest gains in diplomatic influence (+6.0), followed by defence networks (+5.4) and economic capability (+1.9), <https://power.lowyinstitute.org/>.

⁴³ Huong Le Thu, “Vietnam steps up to take ASEAN leadership role”, *The Strategist*, 5 August 2020, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/vietnam-steps-up-to-take-asean-leadership-role/>; Try Ananto Wicaksono, “Vietnam: ASEAN’s New De Facto Leader?”, *The ASEAN Post*, 17 October 2020, <https://theaseanpost.com/article/vietnam-aseans-new-de-facto-leader>.

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