ASEAN-Indochinese Relations from the British Perspective, 1989-1993

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Abstract

This research aimed to study the historical development of relations between the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and Indochinese countries between 1989 and 1993 and to identify the attitude of the British government vis-à-vis ASEAN policy towards the Indochinese states during this period. Analysis drew on the Foreign and Commonwealth Office's recently declassified archival documents held at the National Archives at Kew in the United Kingdom. The research found that the ASEAN member states were generally supportive of the inclusion of Indochinese states in the organization. The level of support for Myanmar/Burma's membership varied, with Thailand being the most supportive. Although ASEAN coherence was high, there were uncertainties as to the effects of the Indochinese states' membership on the organization. The British were initially skeptical of Vietnam's capacity for economic and political reform, but became more supportive. Indochinese developments were not the main hindrance to ASEAN and European Community relations. Instead, the Portuguese position regarding Indonesia and East Timor proved to be the main obstacle.

Keywords: ASEAN, Indochina, Cold War, Britain, Vietnam

Introduction

The end of the Cold War was a significant transformative time for the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) that paved the way

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for the inclusion of the previously hostile Indochinese states into the association. These regional developments were affected by extra-regional events, namely the Soviet Union's policy adjustment under Mikhail Gorbachev, triggered by severe internal economic problems. These problems were exacerbated by an aggressive and over-reaching foreign policy, including engagement in the arms race, space race, and nuclear race with the United States, support for multiple communist guerilla groups across the globe, and aid to newly-established socialist-communist nations, including those in Indochina, as well as direct warfare, in particular the invasion and occupation of Afghanistan (1979-1989) (Zubok, 2021: 3).

Consequently, these unsustainable projects led to reform attempts through *Perestroika* and *Glasnost* (Boterbloem, 2018: 275-277). These new approaches also affected Soviet foreign policy. For ASEAN, this new approach was expressed through speeches, such as Gorbachev's Vladivostok speech on 28 July, 1986, which announced the Soviet Union's intention to improve relations with non-communist states in Asia. Actions also matched the rhetoric, for example, the reduction or halting of aid to countries that were obstructing regional peace, such as Vietnam and North Korea.

Regarding Indochina, an important obstacle for regional peace throughout the latter half of the Cold War was the Soviet-backed foreign and military policies of Vietnam. Following their victory in the Vietnam War in 1975, the Vietnamese engaged in a conflict with Democratic Kampuchea under the Khmer Rouge, which had the backing of the People's Republic of China–the Soviet Union's communist rival (Wasserstrom, 2022: 256-261). The dynamics of the Sino-Soviet split, together with local causes of conflict led to Vietnam's occupation of Democratic Kampuchea and the establishment of the People's Republic of Kampuchea in 1979. Although this action deposed the genocidal Khmer Rouge government, the Vietnamese invasion caused great concern among the non-communist countries within ASEAN and beyond (Lien and Sharrock, 2014: 243).

Vietnamese aggression spurred ASEAN to collective action to prevent the expansion of communist influence beyond Indochina. Prior to the invasion, ASEAN had great difficulties in formulating common positions on substantive matters. Thus, the Vietnamese invasion could be said to have "resurrected" ASEAN and its role on the global stage through concerted action in the United Nations via resolutions that blocked the recognition of the People's Republic of Kampuchea and condemned the Vietnamese occupation. ASEAN also rendered aid to the resistance movement in Kampuchea, including the Khmer Rouge remnants and anti-communist groups under Prince Sihanouk. These actions drew on the support of major powers, such as the People's Republic of China, Japan, and the United States that may not have cooperated with each other in ordinary circumstances due to historical and ideological differences.

ASEAN's actions during this period may thus indicate an open hostility toward Vietnam and the Indochinese states under its influence, seemingly closing the possibility of Indochinese membership. Yet, despite this hostility, following the conclusion of the Cold War and the Soviet Union's collapse, the Indochinese states were rapidly admitted. Vietnam gained membership in 1995, followed by Lao PDR and Myanmar in 1997, and Cambodia in 1999. This article seeks to examine how this development came about at the end of the Cold War from the British perspective. At that time it was a major power in the United Nations Security Council and chair of the European Community (June–December, 1992) with regional economic and political interests in Southeast Asia through Hong Kong and its close relations with Commonwealth member states.

Literature Review

As a regional organization, ASEAN is a relatively new arrival. Established in 1967 on the back of failed or defunct regional associations, such as the Association of Southeast Asia (ASA), the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO), and Maphilindo, it was not expected to

survive. For the historian, ASEAN poses a challenge due to its relative novelty, as well as its dynamism, which has led to difficulties in accessing relevant archival materials, as well as pinning down definitive accounts of the organization's development.

However, as ASEAN passed its half-century anniversary in 2017 and approaches its 60th in 2027, a number of histories have been published. This article will now review those that are directly relevant to its objectives of researching the relationship between ASEAN and the Indochinese countries at the end of the Cold War, as well as the admission of Indochinese states, in particular Vietnam, to the association. In this connection, Nguyen (2007) argued that Vietnam's membership in ASEAN was driven by pragmatic reasons and concerns for economic growth, political independence, and regime survival (Nguyen, 2007: 485-486). However, Nguyen discounts the significance of ASEAN as a counterweight to a rising China, as well as the economic benefits of ASEAN, as Vietnam-ASEAN economic relations had already stabilized prior to Vietnam's ASEAN membership (Nguyen, 2007: 487-488).

Nevertheless, Roberts (2012) argued that Vietnam's decision to join was motivated by the economic costs of the war with Cambodia and the failure of socialist economic policies, which severely weakened the Communist Party of Vietnam's internal standing (Roberts, 2012: 61). The shift to economic reforms made Vietnamese values and policies more compatible with ASEAN's collective aspirations. As for Lao PDR, Roberts argued that it was mainly due to the Laotian leadership understanding that membership would provide concrete benefits to the country through greater international recognition and aid (Roberts, 2012: 62). Myanmar and Cambodia were more problematic, however, and the ASEAN states were concerned with the potential effects of human rights abuses in the former and political instability in the latter on the organization (Roberts, 2012: 62).

While Natalegawa (2018) does not provide much historical detail for this period, he focuses on the consequences and impact of ASEAN expansion by comparing ASEAN's adroit adaptation to shifting geopolitics with the European Union and NATO's expansion into

Eastern Europe. Rather than being a source of inter-superpower tensions, ASEAN's actions made the region become "the hub for dialogue and communication" between China, Russia, and the United States (Natalegawa, 2018: 49). Mahbubani and Sng (2021) agreed with this assessment, arguing that while there was a similar initial openness, the unnecessary expansion of NATO to Russia's border was a "deliberate provocation" and "demonstrated a lack of geopolitical wisdom, in contrast to ASEAN, which succeeded in admitting its erstwhile adversary, Vietnam, into the fold" (Mahbubani and Sng, 2021: 59).

Out of all the works reviewed, Weatherbee (2019) is the only truly historical one, whereas the others are focused more on contemporary affairs and international relations. Weatherbee argues that "ASEAN had dangled the prospect of future membership in ASEAN before Vietnam as a political enticement" since the organization's inception (Weatherbee, 2019: 101), suggesting that the offer was not entirely sincere. Vietnam rejected the offer, still seeing ASEAN as a tool of Western imperialism. Weatherbee attributes the subsequent Vietnamese change of attitude to "pragmatic statesmanship" in the face of economic reforms (*doi moi*) and the changing geopolitical landscape (Weatherbee, 2019: 102). Vietnam saw acceptance in ASEAN as a way to access the global economy, which was vital for successful economic reforms and reinforcement of its weakened political authority. Furthermore, Russia's rapprochement with China was a cause for concern as it left Vietnam bereft of its traditional ally (Weatherbee, 2019: 103). With the withdrawal of American troops, ASEAN also found itself without its traditional security umbrella. Weatherbee thus disagrees with Nguyen in arguing that ASEAN membership could act as a counterweight to Beijing, so long as unity could be maintained (Weatherbee, 2019: 104).

In sum, the literature suggests that there were push and pull factors to the inclusion of Indochinese countries in ASEAN. Push factors, which included internal economic and political issues, were triggered by the Soviet Union's decline, as well as decreases in foreign aid. Pull factors were access to resources that allowed the Indochinese regimes to mitigate or counteract the challenges they faced, especially

financial resources to facilitate their adaptation to a market economy. Achievement of economic prosperity supported the legitimacy of the regimes. ASEAN also welcomed the expansion of membership to solidify its regional influence and support regional peace and security. Although the literature lacks consensus regarding ASEAN's capacity to counteract Beijing's influence, both the Indochinese and ASEAN states aimed to protect and pursue their national interests, vis-à-vis their political, economic, and regional security. The alignment of these interests made Indochinese objectives compatible with those of ASEAN. The rapprochement between the two sides reflected a greater geopolitical wisdom than developments elsewhere, where ASEAN was able to improve relations with its erstwhile opponent and develop itself into a nexus of regional cooperation rather than conflict.

Nevertheless, these developments did not occur in a vacuum, but during a period of major geopolitical alignments. The studies cited mainly focus on an ASEAN-centric perspective but do not go into detail regarding the perspective of the major powers that still wielded significant political and economic influence, particularly those with seats on the United Nations Security Council. Thus, this research aims to fill this gap, in part, by examining ASEAN and Indochinese developments from the perspective of the British government.

Research Objectives and Methodology

The objectives of this research were twofold: 1) study the development of relations between ASEAN and the Indochinese countries between 1989 and 1993 through British sources; and 2) to identify the attitude of the British government vis-à-vis ASEAN policy towards the Indochinese countries during this period.

This article utilized primary evidence from the National Archives at Kew in the United Kingdom, especially the recently declassified material from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO)[2] between

[2] Prior to 1968, this office, which is equivalent to a ministry elsewhere, was known as the "Foreign Office" (FO). In 1968, the FO combined with the Commonwealth Office and became the "Foreign and Commonwealth Office" (FCO). Since 2020, the office has been renamed as the "Foreign, Commonwealth, and Development Office" (FCDO).

1989 and 1993. Of this collection, there are around 13,000 pages of documents that deal directly with ASEAN's development. These documents reflect the British government's perspective, a government that remained influential in European affairs, through its membership of the European Community and its "special relationship" with the United States (Dumbrell, 2006). While by this time the Southeast Asian British colonies had regained independence, the British remained the leading European country in the ASEAN region in terms of economic investment. It also closely monitored developments in Myanmar/Burma. This interest stemmed not only from its interest in a former colony, but also through its position as a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council. This position also obliged it to follow closely developments in Indochina and elsewhere around the world. For these reasons, the documents reflect the perspective of a major European power with historical links to the region and a continuing concern stemming from its own economic interest and international obligations and should, therefore, provide a valuable prism with which to view developments in Southeast Asia.

Research Results

Superficially, it may appear that the United Kingdom's role in Southeast Asia may have been limited. The British remained aloof from the Vietnam War and were mainly concerned with the decolonization of Malaysia and Singapore, which received their independence in 1957, and Brunei Darussalam, which regained its sovereignty in 1984. Notwithstanding these developments, Britain retained close links with its former colonies through bilateral mechanisms, as well as the Commonwealth. Furthermore, its possession of Hong Kong, which remained an important regional center for trade and finance, ensured continuing economic interest.

Indeed, the British still saw themselves as the market leaders in ASEAN. In 1990, 23 percent of ASEAN exports were destined for Britain. British investment also dominated the region. In 1991, Singapore

was the recipient of one billion GBP of investment, followed by Thailand (900 million GBP), Indonesia (613 million GBP), Malaysia (600 million GBP), the Philippines (377 million GBP), and Brunei (250 million GBP). Even so, the British were beginning to be concerned with competitors, especially Germany, whose exports to the region were increasing by a rate of 200 percent per year, while British exports saw only a 40 percent increase in the same period (FCO 15/6687, 9, 8 April 1992). This dominant economic position stemmed from the prioritization of economic interests over political concerns. A meeting of Southeast Asian Heads of Mission agreed in 1989 that "British Government resources in South East Asia and more widely along the Western Pacific Rim should be devoted primarily to our economic interests" (Colvin, 1989).

Emerging competition with other European countries was an important issue considering Britain's membership in the European Community (EC),[3] which was already demonstrating a significant role in European economic integration and collective negotiations with extra-regional actors, including ASEAN. At that time, ASEAN was already conducting regular ministerial meetings with its EC counterpart. The British attached great importance to economic negotiations via EC mechanisms, even when the EC common position did not align with British interests. The majority of the documents are concerned with these negotiations although some touch on issues that directly concern British interests, such as the Vietnamese boat people, whose movement affected Hong Kong, the final destination of many of these displaced people (Colvin, 1989) or developments in the Cambodian-Vietnamese War, which remained an important issue at the United Nations where Britain was a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council.

ASEAN's potential opening to Vietnam and other Indochinese countries was thus an important issue at the tail end of the Cambodian-Vietnamese War and one that Britain followed closely. In Britain's view, "ASEAN has, for too long, been an empty vessel economically… [but] Its political importance is clear: it remains central to the immediate foreign policy concerns of most of its members…" (Duggan, 1991).

[3] Subsequently, the EC became the European Union (EU) in 1993 through the Maastricht Treaty.

Avenues for the membership of Vietnam, Laos, and Burma[4] were also becoming more evident. Vietnam seemed most likely to join ASEAN first, followed by the Lao People's Democratic Republic and Burma. Kampuchea is not mentioned much since its internal situation remained fluid, even after the signing of the 1991 Paris Peace Accords. This assessment radically changed in 1992 following the Soviet Union's collapse, the withdrawal of American troops from Southeast Asia, the apparent success of the Paris Peace Accords, the Japanese announcement of a more vigorous involvement in regional security, as well as faltering international trade negotiations. The article will now present its analysis of four major issues that emerged from the documents, namely: Vietnamese membership of ASEAN, United Nations' recognition of the Bali Treaty, perspectives of the major powers, and ASEAN perspectives on expansion.

Vietnamese Membership in ASEAN

With hindsight, Vietnam appeared to be the nation with the strongest possibility of joining ASEAN among the Indochinese states. However, from the contemporary British viewpoint, this was by no means certain and the change in attitude reflects situational developments, policy changes, and the impact of the Soviet Union's collapse. Initially, Britain lacked confidence in Vietnam's capacity for economic and political reform. There was also uncertainty regarding the impact of Vietnamese membership on ASEAN. Nevertheless, within three years, this attitude had undergone a revolution.

Initially (1989-1990), the British maintained a cautious approach to Vietnam, probably due to the fluidity of the Indochinese situation. Furthermore, Vietnam had yet to take an acceptable position on the Vietnamese boat people and the repatriation of refugees. Thus, the British pushed for all sides to be cautious in allowing Vietnamese access to international financial institutions and the establishment of formal

[4] The British refuse to use Myanmar as the official name of the country, preferring to use Burma. This choice reflects its longstanding rejection of the legitimacy of that nation's military government and its policies, including the official name change in 1989.

relations with the EC (Eldon, 1990). At this stage, the British viewed Vietnamese membership in ASEAN as unrealistic, with concrete economic reforms needed prior to any further developments (FCO, n.d.).

This cautious position changed in 1991. Reports mentioning concrete economic improvements in Vietnam began to surface by June 1991, albeit with a cautionary note that reforms in other areas may be required:

> Vietnam has made remarkable progress. Lengthy internal discussions are currently being held on the political and economic choices facing a country which could have a great future, including–I assume–within ASEAN, provided that it does not confine its liberalization to the economic field. Co-operation with the countries of the [European] Community will depend on the outcome of those debates (Colvin, 1991).

This cautiously positive stance was maintained throughout 1991, even when Vietnam indicated its clear intention to accede to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (Bali Treaty). The British saw that it was too early to judge this position as a "radical shift" and viewed the change in the Vietnamese position as a forced reaction to the prevailing situation (Carrick, 1991).

The British position changed completely in the following year (1992), as indicated in a speech drafted for Douglas Hurd, the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, for the opening of the 10th ASEAN-EC Ministerial Meeting in October.[5] The speech stated:

> …That is why we share a common interest in seeing Vietnam rejoin the international community; we welcome its accession with your encouragement to the ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation signed at Bali in 1976 (Hurd, 1992).

This statement indicates that Britain had achieved its objectives. In 1990, diplomatic talking points still mentioned the objective of persuading "the Vietnamese to accept the importance of getting closer to ASEAN and the EC, and that we will use our influence with both if they agree to a regional deal on boat people" (Eldon, 1990). It may have been helpful that the Vietnamese were consistent in their intention to pursue ASEAN membership (Davies, 1989; Kazer, 1990), and required little persuasion to do so by this point, unlike the Burmese government whose spokesperson stated unequivocally that Burma has "no intention of joining any organisations" and that "we do not want the interference of the diplomats" (Hartland-Swann, 1990).

Despite these rapid positive developments, the British remained concerned regarding the potential effects of Vietnam's ASEAN membership, cautioning, "With a Cambodian settlement, and the prospect of Vietnam joining the world economy, Indo-China could become more a focus of competition among ASEAN members than a source of unity" (George, 1991). This competition might stem from the competition among existing ASEAN states for a share in an emerging and lucrative market. If this competition intensified, ASEAN might turn inward rather than continue its engagement with outside regions (Johnson, 1992). Furthermore, if the Cambodian settlement led to Indochina's rapid economic development and ASEAN expansion through the inclusion of Vietnam, Lao PDR, and Cambodia, this might lead to the organization's loss of coherence (Hope, 1991). Fractures might also emerge between countries with differing levels of economic development or groups of countries with common interest. Of particular concern was the potential divide between the mainland and maritime ASEAN states that might form their own internal blocs. The advent of joint schemes, such as the SIJORI Project, which aimed to promote economic cooperation between Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia, rather than the whole region, seemed to indicate this development. Nevertheless, as stated in the literature review, ASEAN and its principles outlined in the Bali Treaty ended up being more a force for regional peace rather than conflict.

[5] At the time, Britain represented the EC, as it held the organization's presidency from June to December, 1992.

Recognition of the Bali Treaty in the United Nations

For ASEAN, Vietnam's accession to the Bali Treaty was a significant milestone and it underlined the organization's continuing dynamism. To press this point on the world stage, ASEAN campaigned for the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) to recognize this treaty in 1992 as a document that laid the foundation for peace in Southeast Asia. This campaign succeeded with the passage of UNGA Resolution A/C.l/47/L.24 in November 1992. From the British perspective, this initiative aligned with the United Nations' Agenda for Peace, which aimed to promote mechanisms for regional stability, as well as preventative diplomacy, which sought to prevent the outbreak of armed conflicts (Stewart, 1992). Nevertheless, there was some puzzlement as to "why the ASEAN countries have suddenly decided to seek UNGA endorsement of a treaty which is nearly 20 years old" (Weston, 1992).

The ASEAN member states campaigned vigorously for UN member states to co-sponsor the draft resolution to indicate their strong support. The results reflected ASEAN's influence and good standing. The UNGA passed the draft resolution on 12 November 1992 without a vote. The substantive content of the resolution appears in the final paragraphs, which stated that the UNGA,

> Recognizing that the Treaty provides a strong foundation for regional confidence-building and for regional cooperation and that it is consistent with the call by the Secretary-General of the United Nations, in his report entitled "An Agenda for Peace", … for a closer relationship between the United Nations and regional associations,
>
> Endorses the purpose and principles of the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in South-East Asia and its provisions for the pacific settlement of regional disputes and for regional cooperation in order to achieve peace, amity, and friendship among the peoples of South-East Asia, in accordance with the Charter of the United Nations, which are consistent with the current climate of enhancing regional and international cooperation (UN General Assembly, 1992: 14).

Significantly, ASEAN was able to persuade 137 member states (out of 170 at the time) to co-sponsor the draft resolution, which was more than two-thirds of the United Nations' membership. An analysis of the co-sponsoring countries found that apart from the ASEAN member states at the present time, the resolution was supported by all five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council, namely: Britain, China, France, Russia, and the United States. At the same time, there were clear splits in the EC bloc. Only Britain, France, Germany, Italy, and the Netherlands co-sponsored the draft resolution, which is a minority of the 11 EC member states (UN General Assembly, 1992: 5).[6]

The split within the EC was mainly due to the conflict between Portugal and Indonesia over East Timor. Portugal campaigned hard against the EC member states' co-sponsorship of ASEAN's draft resolution, though it stopped short of calling for a vote (Govier, 1992). This hardline position against Indonesia also affected other dimensions of EC-ASEAN relations. Portugal constantly used the East Timor issue as a negotiating condition for broad agreements between the EC and ASEAN, causing great frustration for Britain. Internal documents often voiced dissatisfaction with Portugal's "pretty extreme" position (Madelin, 1992) and that "the Portuguese refusal to budge will … damage UK and EC interests in Indonesia and ASEAN" (Carrick, 1992). The British position aligned with the Indonesian stance, where Ali Alatas, the Indonesian foreign minister, stated that he

> …deeply regretted that one member of the EC had prevented consensus on a new agreement and that East Timor had become the bone of contention in a forum where it was an extraneous issue. East Timor had to be dealt with in the proper fora. He was disappointed that the EC had been unable to move forward. Indonesia had experience of organisation [sic] such as NAM and OPEC where decisions were taken by consensus but rationality was necessary as well as solidarity (Montgomery, 1992a).

[6] The missing EC member states were Belgium, Luxembourg, Denmark, Ireland, Greece, Portugal, and Spain.

Perspectives of the Major Powers

Apart from its role in the EC, the British documents also touch on the perspectives of the regional political and economic superpowers, namely the United States, Japan, and Russia. A notable omission is China, perhaps due to a lull in Sino-British relations in the aftermath of internal Chinese political developments in 1989. There is some convergence in the objectives of the major powers covered, especially in their support of relations between ASEAN and the Indochinese countries and their own attempt to normalize relations with these countries.

The earliest country to see and seize the initiative was Japan. In 1993, the Japanese prime minister confidently stated that:

> The conclusion of the Cambodian Peace Accords opens the way not only to Cambodian reconstruction but also to the promotion of the policy of openness by Vietnam and Laos. It thus makes it possible for Southeast Asia, which consists of the countries of ASEAN and Indochina, to develop as an integral whole. Such development has consistently been the goal of Japan's Indochina policy since 1977 (Miyazawa, 1993).

This rhetoric was matched by action. Japan was constant in its support for ASEAN and Indochinese infrastructural, human resource, and socio-economic development (Miyazawa, 1993). The British also observed that Japan viewed Vietnam as an important lynchpin in maintaining regional stability and wished "to extend the ASEAN success story to Indochina," while furthering their own commercial interests (Boyd, 1993).

Russia, which provided most of the aid for Vietnam during the Cold War, neither resisted nor expressed open support for regional developments. Russia's main objectives regarding Vietnam were to "reset" relations, negotiate for the stationing of a small military contingent at Cam Ranh Bay, and settle the issue of Vietnam's financial debts owed to the Soviet Union, which were now owed to Russia (Hurd,1993a). Russia's soft and non-committal stance reflects the decline of its political and economic influence on the world stage. Its stance also mirrors that of the British and the Americans in aiming for a normalization of bilateral ties with Indochinese states.

An exception to the rosy outlook on regional development was the United States, which was more equivocal. The Americans expressed doubt regarding Vietnam's effectiveness as an ASEAN member state but "were reconciled to ASEAN's overtures to Vietnam" and "that–long term–closer Vietnam/ASEAN relations would be an important element in ensuring stability in Indo-China" (Pattison, 1992). This position was evidently closer to Britain's initial stance that also lacked confidence in Vietnam's capacity for internal reforms.

The ASEAN Perspectives on Expansion

Although initially the British viewed ASEAN expansion as a delicate issue that should not be raised first by their side, the evidence concurs that ASEAN welcomed Vietnamese and Lao PDR membership. This welcome also extended conditionally to Cambodia and Burma. Thus, the British thought that ASEAN would use the 6+2+2 formula, where Vietnam and Lao PDR would be admitted first, followed by Cambodia and Burma. Vietnam and Lao PDR were seen as pilot programs to pave the way for the other two states when they became ready for membership (Saunders, 1992).

In general, all ASEAN member states at the time welcomed Vietnam as a potential member state. Malaysia welcomed the membership of Vietnam and Lao PDR, observing that:

> Vietnam's and Lao's [sic] accession to the treaty of amity and cooperation in Southeast Asia is therefore a logical development of the inherent goodwill that exists in the region.
>
> For Malaysia, it is our hope that ASEAN would eventually encompass all the countries in Southeast Asia. It is our wish to see the spirit of ASEAN cooperation and consultations spread to all the countries in the region (Montgomery, 1992b).

Meanwhile, Thailand, according to Adams (1992), was "impressed by the sincere interest of Vietnam and Laos in developing relations with ASEAN and in creating market economies but acknowledged that it would be some years before those countries were ready for full membership of ASEAN." The concern regarding timing was similar to Singapore's stance, which, itself, was comparable to the initial British skepticism regarding Vietnam's capacity for political and economic reform. Brigadier General Lee Hsien Loong, the deputy prime minister at the time,[7] believed that "it would be a long time before Vietnam could be a member of ASEAN: 'its economy was at a different stage of development and its political system was not the same.' ASEAN would develop a dialogue with Vietnam but ASEAN could not afford to bring in a different system which would make everything 'much more complicated'" (Drake, 1992).

Beyond adherence to the ASEAN consensus in accepting the Indochinese states as future members in principle, the positions of Indonesia, Brunei, and the Philippines are not so evident in British documents. A major issue of concern for both Britain and ASEAN was Burma's membership. Here, the Indonesian position was particularly clear. While Indonesia welcomed Burmese membership in principle, it saw that the decision was ultimately an issue for Burma, not ASEAN. Nevertheless, Indonesia argued that Burma had to fulfill at least three conditions to join. First, Burma had to clearly express its intention to seek membership, at the very least through a formal note through the embassies of the ASEAN member states in Burma. Second, the Burmese government had to appoint a representative that could provide accurate information on the domestic situation in Burma. This measure would create better understanding for all sides, while at the time ASEAN had to obtain information from western media sources, which might not necessarily reflect realities on the ground. Finally, Burma had to undertake domestic reforms to prove itself as a liberal, sovereign country that had the capacity to cooperate with other countries in the region (Hartland-Swann, 1993).

[7] Subsequently, Lee Hsien Loong became the prime minister of Singapore (2004-2024).

Indonesia's position on Burma was the opposite of the Thai position. More than any other ASEAN member state, Thailand was eager to persuade Burma to join ASEAN. According to British documents, Thailand had announced at the UNGA that it "looked forward to the day when Burma and the countries of Indo-China would join ASEAN" (George, 1990). This position aligns with the EC-ASEAN ministerial meeting in 1991, in which "ministers reviewed developments in Burma and Vietnam and expressed the hope that the situations there would evolve in such a way as to enable them to take their place among the dynamic Asian economies" (Acland, 1991). Yet, Thailand was not content to wait for a favorable situation to unfold, but actively pushed for Burmese membership, especially during its chairmanship of ASEAN in 1993. Thailand announced that one of its key objectives during its chairmanship was to push for Cambodia and, if possible, Burma, to accede to the Bali Treaty. The Thais also sought to strengthen ties between ASEAN and the Indochinese countries through the involvement of third countries, especially Japan (Adams, 1993). This optimistic policy towards Burma greatly concerned Britain, who viewed the Thais as making far too many compromises, while Burma had hardly shifted in a positive direction (Hurd, 1993b).

Conclusion and Recommendations

Evidence from Britain's Foreign and Commonwealth Office provides additional details on the development of ASEAN-Indochina relations during this period beyond the existing literature. British documents conclude that "ASEAN had proved a significant success, helping to avert the Balkanisation of SE Asia" (Thomas, 1992) due to its open policy of admitting the Indochinese states, especially after the successful settlement of the situation in Cambodia and the end of Vietnam's aggressive policies. This conclusion agrees with the existing literature, such as Natalegawa (2018) and Mahbubani and Sng (2021) that attribute the successful integration of Indochinese countries into ASEAN as a key element to maintaining regional peace and stability in the post-Cold War period.

From the beginning, the British saw that "All ASEAN countries hope that the post settlement period would lead to an era of cooperation between ASEAN and Indochina states" (Carter, 1989). ASEAN was especially welcoming of Vietnam and Lao PDR's membership. Cambodia and Burma's membership were also welcomed in principle, albeit with certain conditions. If there were disagreements, they were mainly to do with the process and perspectives on the readiness of applicant states. These differences did not lead to significant conflicts within the organization.

Britain demonstrated an initial skepticism regarding Vietnam's potential for reforms. This position aligns with that of the United States and some ASEAN member states, especially Singapore. However, this position changed, and Britain became a strong supporter of Vietnamese reforms and development, including its ASEAN membership. Britain also attached importance to progress in political reforms at first, but this interest dissipated in favor of concentrating on furthering economic reforms that were more in line with the re-alignment in British regional priorities. Apart from Britain, other major powers also supported the membership of Indochinese nations in ASEAN, especially Japan. However, the United States remained skeptical in its assessments. Furthermore, ASEAN initiatives received the strong support of United Nations member states, as reflected in the strong support for the resolution recognizing the Bali Treaty and its role in maintaining regional peace.

During this period, the main obstacle in the development of ASEAN-EC relations was not the uncertainties in Indochina, but the Portuguese position within the EC, which was using economic negotiations to pressure Indonesia over its policies in East Timor. Although the British understood the significance of this issue, they were extremely frustrated when it became the sole obstacle in reaching broad agreements in areas of cooperation unrelated to this peripheral issue. This situation reflects the difficulties of multilateral negotiations, and it is arguably this dissatisfaction that became one of the underlying factors behind Britain's eventual decision to withdraw from the European Union in 2020.

Although these conclusions are clear, there are some noteworthy limitations. The first is that the views above are mainly from British sources, and thus are filtered through British perspectives and interests. This is reflected in the documents' strong economic focus and bias towards following developments in Vietnam and its potentially lucrative market, rather than Lao PDR or Cambodia. The latter case was followed for its security rather than economic implications. For the same reason, beyond a brief concern for human rights promotion, the British analysis also does not address the significance of sociopolitical factors at the national and regional levels in the push for regional integration during this period. While the documents touch on the perspectives of other powers, such as Russia, the United States, and Japan, the Chinese view is largely absent, not because of China's lack of importance to regional developments, but most likely due to poor Sino-British relations during this period that prevented discussions and information sharing.

Therefore, to obtain the complete picture of developments during this period, it is recommended that further research be undertaken in Indochinese archives, as well as those of other countries with significant roles in the region, particularly the ASEAN member states, China, Japan, and the United States. That research can corroborate, fill in gaps from the British perspective, and/or provide alternative perspectives on developments during this period.

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