



SOUTHEAST ASIA: THE GREAT FORGOTTEN OF FRENCH DIPLOMACY?

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Photo: French President Emmanuel Macron (right) welcomed and held talks with Party General Secretary Nguyễn Phú Trọng during his official visit to France on March 27, 2018. Source: VNA/VNS by Tri Dung

Despite having a long-standing presence in Southeast Asia, France's current engagement in the region remains limited. Since 2018, France has been formalizing its Indo-Pacific strategy to bolster its regional assets and assert its identity as an Indo-Pacific power, fostering new relationships in Asia. However, despite this strategy, France's effectiveness in Southeast Asia is still lacking, as it prioritizes the Indian Ocean due to its territorial interests, forming the cornerstone of its Indo-Pacific foreign policy.

France's attention is also divided due to handling ongoing conflicts such as the Russia-Ukraine war, the war in Gaza, and domestic European affairs, which threaten Europe's security and require France's leadership. The complex geopolitics in Southeast Asia, including maritime disputes and competition among major powers, are potential sources of conflict. Additionally, Southeast Asia's rise as the most dynamic area in the world prompts a reevaluation of France's regional policy.

France, a third way for the region?

The French government's policy document titled "France's Partnerships in the Indo-Pacific" emphasizes a commitment to a third way in the region, aiming to collaborate with all well-intentioned powers beyond traditional blocs (1). Recognizing ASEAN's crucial role in the Indo-Pacific, France prioritizes strengthening relations with ASEAN and its member states. This strategy has resulted in strategic partnerships with three ASEAN countries: Indonesia in 2011, Singapore in 2012, and Vietnam in 2013, (2). On March 4, 2021, France officially launched a development partnership with ASEAN covering various areas such as health, the environment, blue economy, biodiversity, vaccine research, technical and vocational training, green and circular economy, connectivity, sustainable infrastructure, and non-traditional security (3). For instance, the Air Quality Improvement Program in ASEAN (AQIP) project, launched on November 20, 2023, is the largest cooperation project between ASEAN and France to date, with funding of EUR 2.5 million from the French Development Agency (4). This project supports ASEAN's efforts to enhance capacity in monitoring and managing air pollution in the region, showcasing France's dedication to ASEAN, the region, and sustainable development.

France can further commit to non-traditional security, particularly in addressing climate change, given that many ASEAN countries are less advanced in this area. Southeast Asia is highly vulnerable to climate change, facing challenges like rising sea levels, heat waves, floods, droughts, and extreme weather events. France, as a leader in the fight against climate change, can leverage its research, funding, and experience to

collaborate with Southeast Asian countries in this critical area. This focus is aligned with ASEAN's current needs, as evident in instances like the drought in Southern Vietnam affecting rice cultivation, which threatens food security given Vietnam's significant role in global rice exports. However, France's approach to Southeast Asia faces limitations compared to countries like Japan, the US, and China, as it cannot provide large-scale infrastructure financing or military equipment donations. Therefore, France can capitalize on its strengths in non-traditional security with ASEAN while other major powers focus on different fields. This approach is well-suited to ASEAN's current priorities, particularly in addressing climate change and other pressing regional challenges.

ASEAN, an essential political partner for France

Regarding political engagement, France is actively involved in supporting ASEAN-led mechanisms and promoting ASEAN centrality. In 2007, France acceded to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC), becoming the first European Union member state to do so (5). Additionally, France has accredited its Ambassadors to ASEAN since 2009, indicating its commitment to engaging with ASEAN (6). In December 2023, France sponsored a workshop on regional security titled "Navigating through Concurrent Security Challenges: How to Keep ASEAN in the Driver's Seat." (7). This workshop aimed to address challenges and provide support to ASEAN-led mechanisms and ASEAN centrality, showcasing France's dedication to strengthening ASEAN's role in regional security. Both France's Indo-Pacific Strategy and ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) share common points, as they seek partnerships with like-minded countries based on a shared vision of challenges and solutions. Both emphasize maintaining a neutral position and avoiding taking sides, which facilitates building trust between France and ASEAN. The 2020 ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute survey on Southeast Asia's state ranked the EU as ASEAN's second most trusted partner, after Japan (8). Given France's status as a major country in the EU, it holds a significant advantage in building trust and cooperation with ASEAN.

France's strategy in the Indo-Pacific, emphasizing neutrality and a third-path approach, benefits ASEAN by promoting multilateralism and reducing concerns about relationships with other major powers like China, the US, and Japan. From ASEAN's perspective, France's strategy is seen as a major power supporting ASEAN-led institutions and strengthening multilateralism and balance in the region. France's non-participation in alliances like the Quad and AUKUS means ASEAN doesn't need to worry about being pressured to take sides. Given ASEAN's relatively weaker voice compared to major powers, having support from major powers that maintain a neutral stance is crucial for bolstering ASEAN's multilateralism efforts. For France, this position allows it to exert more influence in ASEAN's areas of strength. By aligning with ASEAN's principles and goals, France can leverage its happy position to enhance its influence within ASEAN and contribute to regional stability and cooperation.

France, a strategic partner for ASEAN?

Among ASEAN countries, France has different levels of cooperation. While many Southeast Asian countries historically purchased weapons from Russia, the conflict in Ukraine and subsequent sanctions have prompted ASEAN to diversify its sources of arms. France, now the world's second-largest arms exporter overtaking Russia, holds 11% of the global arms market (9) and has seized this opportunity to sell arms to ASEAN countries. For instance, France recently sold two Scorpene submarines to Indonesia on April 3, 2024, and French weapons maker Nexter Defence System is engaging in long-term cooperation with the Indonesian government to develop a domestic weapons industry (10). Furthermore, France and Malaysia reinforced their strategic partnership in defense on December 9, 2023, underscoring ASEAN's role and France's role as an observer in the ASEAN Defense Minister's Meeting Plus (ADMM Plus) (11). Additionally, Singapore and France aim to enhance ties through a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP) by 2025 (12). On December 2, 2023, the Philippines and France agreed to enhance defense cooperation and pursue an agreement allowing them to deploy troops to each other's territories. In fact, France has also

shown its commitment to maintaining peace in maritime security in the South China Sea by deploying patrol ships multiple times in the region.

Indochina, an ancient influence but still too limited

While France maintains good relations with Indochina, particularly through economic and Francophone activities, the relationship remains relatively limited. This is especially true with Vietnam, identified as a key partner for France in Southeast Asia. In 2023, France and Vietnam celebrated the 50th anniversary of their relationship and the 10th anniversary of their strategic partnership. There is potential to elevate this relationship to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership—similar to the progress observed in the US-Vietnam relationship despite historical challenges. However, this process requires significant efforts from both countries. It is notable that despite important official visits between France and Vietnam, the President of France has not visited Vietnam during significant events such as the 50th anniversary of their relationship. In contrast, other European countries like the Netherlands and Eastern European nations, all members of the EU, have sent their presidents to Vietnam, notably in 2023, marking important diplomatic relations established by Vietnam in 1973. Efforts must continue to leverage Vietnam's strengths in sectors such as textiles, footwear, agriculture, and aquaculture within the framework of the EU-Vietnam Free Trade Agreement (EVFTA) to strengthen economic ties. Collaboration between France and Vietnam in strategic sectors is crucial for reinforcing bilateral relations. This includes encouraging French investments that align with Vietnam's foreign investment policy and promoting partnerships in high technology and industry. Both countries recognize the importance of cooperation in sustainable development, ecological transition, and combating climate change, necessitating joint efforts on an international scale. This partnership should encompass infrastructure development, energy transition projects, and sustainable transport initiatives to promote environmentally sustainable practices. Regarding arms sales, although Vietnam has shown interest in French weaponry, the high cost has posed challenges. Despite the ongoing conflict between Russia and

Ukraine, Vietnam's military cooperation with Russia continues successfully. In the future, France might consider adopting a similar approach to what it plans for Indonesia by enhancing Vietnam's capacity to develop its own armaments. This strategy aligns with Vietnam's current needs and could foster closer defense cooperation between France and Vietnam.

The potential for cooperation between France and ASEAN remains substantial, with both parties sharing aligned perspectives and priorities. However, to fully realize this potential, France must translate its vision into practical actions and initiatives. By doing so, France can strengthen its partnership with ASEAN and significantly contribute to regional stability, development, and cooperation.

Disclaimer: All opinions in this article are solely those of the author and do not represent any organization.

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