

***ASEAN – Canada Strategic Partnership:
Progress, Element of National Interest, Prospects and the Role of Viet Nam***

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Abstract

ASEAN is a prestigious regional organization and an important partner of many countries around the world. While global multilateral institutions have constantly been facing difficulties and challenges, ASEAN has succeeded in maintaining its stable operations and its' central role in the regional cooperative structure. A variety of its' partners has expressed the desire to deepen and promote their relationship with ASEAN, among which Canada just announced its Indo-Pacific Strategy focusing on the partnership expansion in the Indo-Pacific region and strengthening Canada's ties with ASEAN, joining the East Asia Summit (EAS) and ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting (ADMM) Plus. Being affected by theories of middle power, Canada's diplomats have pursued multilateral diplomacy. However, Canada's efforts do not necessarily match with ASEAN's habit of approaching a bilateral Canada – ASEAN Strategic Partnership, and it might take a longer way for both parties to meet each other's ends. Our research looks into theories of national interests and middle power, followed by the progress of this bilateral cooperation towards their Strategic Partnership along with the challenges keeping Canada, despite its multiple efforts, not yet becoming a participant in a selection of ASEAN's central events. In addition, our research also aims to explain the origins of such challenges by considering both sides' national interests as the vital element. By the end, we expect to visualize the developing path of ASEAN-Canada relations in the upcoming period and provide suggestions on the role of Vietnam in strengthening Canada's cooperation with ASEAN.

Keywords: ASEAN, Canada, Strategic Partnership

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Introduction

In recent years, the escalating tension in the major powers' balance of power has created space and opportunities for rising middle powers and regional institutions to take their positions in international issues and involvement in other regions. Among these significant risers, Canada has actively shown its dedication to acclaiming a deserving position in international affairs, far from being recognized as just a backyard neighbor of the US. In the Asia Pacific, China's intensifying power and the US's interference in the region have signified the role and position of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) as a regional key player, an increasingly important partner of many countries around the world. In recent times, both ASEAN and Canada have been showing and creating concrete development in their bilateral relations concerning various cooperating fields. The ASEAN – Canada relationship has been influenced by the element of national interest from both sides. Canada maintains its national interest to pursue the position of a middle power with the characteristic of prioritizing multilateral diplomacy, while ASEAN aims to preserve its member's self-deciding capability and strengthen its leading position in maintaining regional stability, especially in the time of major powers balancing.

Theories of National Interest

Within the field of international relations, the national interest has frequently been assumed to comprise the pursuit of power, security, and wealth. Neorealist and liberal institutionalist scholars tend to define the national interest as revolving around security and power. Liberal scholars see national interests as an aggregation of the preferences of domestic political groups. Constructivist scholars reject that states' national interest is static and can be assumed a priority; rather, they argue that states' preferences are shaped through social interactions and are changeable.

However, the most common approach to the concept of national interest is a finite set of national objectives which, by possessing a large measure of the formal attributes by which the national interest is defined, are considered its proper subsets.

Theories of Middle Power

After World War II, it can be said that Canadian diplomats such as Hume Wrong (Canada Ambassador to the US 1946-1953), Norman Robertson (Deputy Secretary of State 1941), Lester Pearson (Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs 1948-1957, Prime Minister 1963-1968), John W. Holmes (Assistant Deputy Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs 1953) were those influenced by international relations theories of a middle power in the shaping its foreign policy.

Realism evaluates the “middle power” according to its hierarchical position and influence on the system, and the middle power is considered to locate the highest position of the middle order, only following the great powers, in the top of the 20 to 30 most powerful countries in the world, not to be confused with other middle countries in the power order of more than 200 countries. Meanwhile, liberalism identifies the middle power based on function, specialization, and expression of multilateralism.

John W. Holmes (1984) argued that the motivation for implementing the foreign policy of the middle powers is the national interest, in the case of Canada, the national interest is to

protect the Canadian people and bring prosperity to the country (p.369). Canada believes that the country's position in the international community will be enhanced if it is a middle power. Canada is geographically located next to the United States, to be unable to compete in either economy or military with the United States, somewhat being eclipsed by the United States, but still wants to be properly recognized by the world. Canada's role as a middle power can help to gain its national interest, to develop a stronger country, while maintaining its position in international politics by participating in multilateral institutions wherever and whenever to meet its demand.

With such awareness, Canadian governments have deployed orientations in foreign policy commensurate with the status and identity of a middle power, prioritizing multilateral diplomacy. In the Asia-Pacific, Canada has committed to play an important role in the region by building partnerships with countries, strengthening economic networks, and providing official development assistance (ODA). Canada has actively participated in important institutions with common interests in the region such as ASEAN. The economic and trade cooperation between Canada and countries in South East Asia has made an important contribution to Canada's economy.

Progress of the ASEAN - Canada Cooperation Towards a Strategic Partnership

ASEAN is a prestigious regional organization and an important partner of countries around the world. In the context of global multilateral institutions facing difficulties and challenges, ASEAN has succeeded in maintaining operations, and maintaining its central role and position in the regional cooperation structure. Many partners, including Canada, have expressed their desire to promote and deepen the partnership with ASEAN.

Following the strategy of a middle power by multilateral diplomacy, Canada has recognized the central role of ASEAN as strengthening cooperation with multilateral institutions and mechanisms in the region. The two sides established ties in 1977. Canada became one of the founding members of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in 1994. This country wishes to soon complete the necessary process to become a Strategic Partner of ASEAN. Canada considers ASEAN to be an important market, the largest politically influential organization in Asia, shaping the regional institutional structure.

However, the cooperation between Canada and ASEAN remains some limitations as follows. Firstly, despite its efforts, Canada has not yet become a member of the important ASEAN meetings including the East Asia Summit (EAS) and the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM+). ASEAN has established a strategic partnership with China (2003), South Korea (2010), India (2012), Australia (2014), the United States (2015), New Zealand (2015), Japan (2015), Russia (2018), and the EU (2020). Which, China, Australia, the US, and India are the four comprehensive strategic partners of ASEAN. These countries are all members of EAS and ADMM+. Therefore, joining these mechanisms seems to be the priority condition for Canada towards an ASEAN-Canada Strategic Partnership. Secondly, although bilateral trade is the main cooperation, the two sides have not yet signed the ASEAN-Canada Free Trade Agreement. Thirdly, the Trudeau Administration mainly focused on the economy without other substantive cooperation in the area of defense and security. There are many areas suitable for the needs of the two sides such as counter-terrorism, violent extremism, transnational crime, cybersecurity, the response to nature disasters, etc. These are potential areas for the two sides to further promote cooperation. The success and limitations of the

ASEAN – Canada relationship have been influenced by the element of national interest from both sides.

The Element of National Interest

Canada's national interest is based on two main factors including the implementation of the foreign policy of a middle power and the priorities of different Canada Prime Ministers.

Firstly, Canada has steadily implemented the foreign policy of a middle power, prioritizing multilateral diplomacy. Canada has actively participated in ASEAN mechanisms that enhance Canada's position in the Asia-Pacific region, developing its economy. This country has established a political network, having diplomatic representation in all 10 ASEAN member states. In 2011, the two sides adopted the Canada-ASEAN Joint Declaration on Trade and Investment, which provides a platform for regular exchanges of information on opportunities to promote trade and investment between Canada and ASEAN (Government of Canada, 2023). Minister of International Trade Edward D. Fast addressed at the Ceremony in Jakarta that Canada is one of ASEAN's longest dialogue partners, the two sides have achieved many successes together over the years, and the declaration is an important milestone, creating new jobs and open new doors of opportunity for Canadians (Government of Canada, 2011). ASEAN and Canada both benefit from close cooperation in trade and investment. In 2021, bilateral merchandise trade increased by 17.5%, Canadian investment in ASEAN increased by 9.3%, and ASEAN investment in Canada increased by 4.6 % as compared to those of the year 2020 (ASEAN, 2022).

Canada has initially succeeded in showing a more active role in the region, enhancing Canada's image and role in ASEAN. Canada has increasingly assisted ASEAN in building a people-oriented, people-centered community through programs that encourage the development of various human capacities. From 2016 to 2024, Canada cooperated with the International Labour Organization (ILO), providing USD 7.2 million to implement final projects and protect the labor rights of immigrants, especially women, through TRIANGLE in ASEAN (International Labour Organization, 2023). During the COVID-19 pandemic, Canada contributed CAD 3.5 million to the COVID-19 ASEAN Response Fund, providing more than 10 million items of personal protective equipment (PPE) to ASEAN (ASEAN, 2022). Those contributions to ASEAN have created a premise for Canada to enhance relations between the two sides towards a Strategic Partnership, consolidating Canada's national interest in multilateral diplomacy of a middle power. However, in comparison with other middle powers such as Australia, the development assistance of Canada to ASEAN is modest, for example, Australia's ODA to ASEAN and Mekong Program 2021-2022 is USD 74.2 million (Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2023). In sum, based on the policy of a middle power, Canada has promoted its national interest in South East Asia and ASEAN nations, favoring its position and securing the prosperity and integrity of the state.

Secondly, Canada's national interests are also based on priorities in the foreign policy of different Canadian Prime Ministers, between Conservative and Liberal Governments, and between Minority and Majority Governments. The Liberals have emphasized Canadian values and international responsibilities towards peace and security, while the Conservatives have focused on defending Canadians and Canada's national interests (Chapnick & Kukucha, 2016). In the case of international trade, the Conservative government defined the national interest not only in economic terms but also based on the government party's electoral

calculus (Chapnick & Kukucha, 2016). Canada's national interest seems to be variable in the case of ASEAN. The minority Paul Martin (the Liberals) and Stephen Harper Government (the Conservatives) missed the opportunity to participate in ASEAN's important mechanisms at the early stage such as EAS, ADMM+, signing the ASEAN-Canada Free Trade Agreement (FTA), while Australia – as same as a middle power – all be a part of EAS in 2005, ADMM+ in 2010, Australia and New Zealand signed the AANZFTA Agreement in 2009. Canada is currently the only major economy in the Asia-Pacific region that is not a member of the EAS. The Trudeau government's long-term commitment to the region was also questioned when Canada unexpectedly announced its withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) negotiations on the sidelines of APEC in Da Nang at the last minute in November 2017. Until December 2018, Canada actively participated in the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) and became its member. Recently, the minority Trudeau Government has launched the Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS), leaving a legacy for his third term, marking an important milestone in Canada's foreign policy in the area.

The IPS, published on November 27, 2022, reflects Canada's foreign policy of a middle power in the region, ensuring its national interests, and supporting a free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific. The IPS has contributed to promoting, supplementing, and consolidating the implementation of Canada's foreign policy to maintain the world order in which Canada holds the position of a middle power within other countries. In particular, the IPS strengthens the cooperation with multilateral institutions and mechanisms in the region. Recognizing the central role of ASEAN, Canada is wishing to establish a Strategic Partnership with ASEAN, becoming a member of the East Asia Summit (EAS) and the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM+), signing Free Trade Agreement (FTA) between ASEAN and Canada. The two sides hold a Summit to celebrate the 45th anniversary of ASEAN-Canada relations in Cambodia in November 2022, and the 20th ASEAN-Canada Dialogue in Malaysia in May 2023. At present, Canada considers ASEAN to be an important market, an organization in Asia that has the largest political influence, shaping the institutional structure in the region. Assistant Deputy Minister for Asia – Pacific of Global Affairs Canada Weldon Epp at the Dialogue conveyed Canada's unwavering support for ASEAN Community-building efforts, assistance towards the region's recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, and commitment to ASEAN Centrality through its active participation in ASEAN-led mechanisms (VNA, 2023). The study revealed that ASEAN-Canada FTA would yield substantial economic benefits, including a remarkable boost of USD 39.4 billion (1.6%) to ASEAN's GDP and USD 5.1 billion (0.3%) to Canada's. However, negotiating and upgrading the relations recently with ASEAN is an arduous task with challenges.

For ASEAN, its “national”, or rather, regional interest surrounds preserving the grounding principle of ASEAN, often referred to as the “ASEAN way”, based upon key factors: informality; consultation and consensus; and non-interference.

Throughout their lengthy history of being divided and colonized by foreign powers, the Southeast Asian states have spent their fair share of time without their ability for self-decision. Even after all the member state advances their independence, the Southeast Asian region has been continuing to be in an unstable and competitive environment, witnessing years of balancing power between major states. Despite continuous challenges and initial low expectations of any possible success as a regional institution (Acharya, 2017, p. 30), ASEAN has earned the recognition it deserves along with a position in world politics, for both its economic development and contribution to regional security balance, maintaining a significant level of cohesion in handling issues both outside and within the region.

54 years since its humble birth in 1967, ASEAN has come a long way. As of 2019, ASEAN's combined merchandise trade volume is US\$2.8 trillion and its share of the world nominal GDP is 3.7%, equivalent to the 5th largest economy in the world. Over half of ASEAN's population of 655.9 million people are enjoying their middle-class status with sustainable growth in a well-connected system of travel and trade. The member countries now have fulfilled the establishment of the ASEAN Community in 2017 (ASEAN Secretariat, 2021). Politically and security-wise, "the Balkans of Asia" has grown to become a credible platform for consultations and exchanges, between not only its member countries but also major powers interested in the stability and prosperity of the area (Pitsuwan, 2017, p. 19). Hence, ASEAN's interests mainly surround the preservation of its grounding principle often referred to as the "ASEAN way", based upon key factors: informality; consultation and consensus; and non-interference.

A. Informality

Most ASEAN member states have histories of being colonies of former imperial powers. Even after the time of colonialization, this area has continuously been in the middle of great powers' competition. In addition to that, these member states have highly varied cultural and traditional heritage. Forms of political institutions and political stability in Southeast Asia are widely spread among the members. They work closely, preferably informally, with each other on mutual matters affecting the sustainability and stability of the region. Informality is now a well-known tradition of ASEAN members and has been a productive approach to the organization's development. Generally, a formal meeting is a time and place to officially talk, negotiate, and conclude on issues that bother involved members. This formality helps the involved parties understand the demands and expectations that they have for each other. However, the collision between different interests often makes it difficult for parties to find a mutual agreement, especially among such a diverse group as ASEAN.

Informality, on the other hand, not only helps the negotiating party to have an opportunity to better capture the roots of their interests but also brings the people directly involved in meeting and negotiating closer to each other through exchanging personal views. ASEAN leaders consider that to be an effective and necessary way to work better together. Frequent informal working breakfasts, lunches, and dinners subsequently lead to retreats. In some cases, "ASEAN Foreign Ministers find their retreat more interesting", in the way that it encourages more interaction and deeper talk on "longer-term issues facing ASEAN" (Chalermpanupap, 2017, p. 79-91). Informality laid down the groundwork for ASEAN's method of decision-making. On and off the record, both the official parties and the personal individuals have the chance to put in their opinions on mutual issues. Such flexibility created by informality provides member states and officials a comfortable atmosphere and mentality to progressively work on differences and enhance mutual interests, which strengthens the regional status of sustainability.

B. Consultation and Consensus

The mentality of ASEAN is the same as that of a village, in which members join in and try to resolve rising problems, "as part of their shared responsibility of belonging to the same village" (Chalermpanupap, 2017, p. 79-91). Similar to the people of a village, ASEAN member states are expected to equally and respectfully take part in the work of the organization. To do so, they must be "willing to make some national or domestic adjustment of policy and attitude to facilitate a consensus decision. It is complex to measure consensus

and consultation when it comes to decision-making. And ASEAN does require decision-making by a two-thirds majority vote if there is no consensus (ASEAN Secretariat, 2021).

However, so far, voting has never been a preferable choice for ASEAN members. That does not mean that ASEAN has always been able to find a mutual voice. Decision-making based solely on consensus and consultation is not usually the most effective way for any group to advance the best possible solution. Rather, it creates an open door for every member to get along and find one way or another to develop suitably. Concluded decisions would not leave room for any possible sharp division between two contrasting parties. Consensus and consultation further support the ASEAN Way's motivation to build a cohesive Southeast Asian community. Even though one can argue that complete consensus and consultation are highly difficult to achieve, they are highly suggestive and encouraging for the stability of the community, assuring member states that their independent interests would be as valuable as the groups' shared concerns.

C. Non-interference

ASEAN has worked hard to ensure stable regional development by affirming that its members' voices are equally heard, and no state is left behind in the development of the whole region. However, consensus and consultation do not mean growing together at all costs. Since the 1967 Bangkok Declaration – ASEAN's founding document, the organization has included the principle of non-interference. Yet the conduction of an official decision or announcement requires complete consensus of all member states. These values have been the main focus of the organization from the very beginning. Most ASEAN member states have histories of being colonies of former imperial powers. In addition to that, these member states have highly varied cultural and traditional heritage. Forms of political institutions and political stability in Southeast Asia are widely spread among the members. Hence, non-interference is as important to them as consultation and consensus.

Despite its accomplishments and long-termed promises, ASEAN has always been criticized for its limited institutionalization and legislation, its lack of conflict-resolving mechanisms, and its distance from the "one identity" that it has been claiming for. Their interdependence is not living up to its promising potential. Intra-ASEAN trade is only a quarter of its total global trade. Many member states' products are identical, compete directly in the global market, and cannot compensate for each other in the intra-regional market (ASEAN, 1995). These are the key factors claimed to be holding back even further and stronger ASEAN's development compared to its potential. Yet, if the last decade was a rough journey for Western states and supposedly more successful multilateral organizations, ASEAN's growth and sustainability have maintained relatively stable, even under the impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic.

ASEAN and its mechanism have worked as an official forum not only to connect the member states, but also to provide the platform for outer states interested in the area to come, discuss, and get involved with the members. With this way of connection, the member states expect to use ASEAN as a mutual ground to help outer states better understand them and to avoid being directly involved in the balance of power between greater states. On the other hand, in mutual disputes with any of the members, outer powers are expected to have to work with the group as a whole to find a mutual voice. This decreases the level of disadvantages for smaller states, as well as encourages greater powers to work multilaterally in resolving bilateral issues. Some examples of this approach are the Declaration on Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC), and the Code of Conduct (COC). These have been the key

mechanism for ASEAN members to work with parties both within and outside the organization in resolving the South China Sea dispute matters. Despite China's consistent mentality to bilaterally work on territorial disputes with states directly concerned, ASEAN has still managed to keep South China Sea disputes as multilateral issues for ASEAN to work together.

Besides being the guiding principle for behaviors among ASEAN members, the ASEAN Way also represents the level of mutual understanding that these members share in underlying the core interests of this regional institution. These interests should be seen as vital for ASEAN's existence and position in regional and international politics. ASEAN is an economic security community first expected to provide its member with a sustainable and peaceful environment to develop independently. Though the mark of the ASEAN Community establishment in 2017 shows the progress of moving forward to a more interdependent society, its original interests have still stood strong. At its core, ASEAN members are mostly developing states who still highly appreciate a sense of independent security while working their way up the economic ladder.

The Role of Vietnam

Vietnam welcomes Canada's further cohesion with ASEAN, contributing to peace and prosperity in the region. Vietnam has affirmed its position in the region through the role of ASEAN Chair in 2020, helping ASEAN overcome the difficulties of coping with the COVID-19 pandemic. Based on its prestige, Vietnam can play an important role in enhancing Canada's cooperation with ASEAN. Recently, Assistant Deputy Minister for Asia – Pacific of Global Affairs Canada Weldon Epp only chose Viet Nam to visit on his trip to South East Asia to attend the 20th ASEAN-Canada Dialogue in Malaysia in May 2023, in the context of the 50th anniversary of diplomatic relations between Viet Nam and Canada.

Firstly, Vietnam can become a gateway for Canada to strengthen its economic ties with ASEAN, connecting Canada's trade and investment activities in the region. Vietnam established a comprehensive partnership with Canada in 2018 and has become Canada's largest trading partner in ASEAN. Canada is also Vietnam's third trading partner in the Americas region, after the United States and Mexico. In 2022, the total trade exchange between Vietnam and Canada reached 7 billion USD, increasing 16.5% compared to 2021 (Bao Thoa & Can Dung, 2023). However, the two sides economies are currently facing many difficulties and challenges due to the worldwide economic recession, caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine. The two-way trade turnover between Vietnam and Canada in the first four months of 2023 reached only USD 1.9 billion, decreasing 16,3% in comparison to the same period in 2022 (Bao Thoa & Can Dung, 2023). To increase the FDI investment of Canadian enterprises in Vietnam in the post-COVID-19 period, Vietnam needs to prepare well conditions in terms of investment and business environment to attract investment efficiency from Canada to Vietnam.

Secondly, Vietnam can assist Canada in understanding and accessing ASEAN's criteria for ensuring regional peace and security. In November 2022, the 17th East Asia Summit focused the collaboration on advancing women's economic empowerment, strengthening energy cooperation, and promoting volunteerism for sustainable development in addressing new and emerging issues and challenges, towards a comprehensive post-COVID-19 pandemic recovery (Summit Charman, 2022). While Canada's Indo-Pacific Strategy outlines five strategic objectives: first, promoting peace, resilience, and security; second, expanding trade,

investment, and supply-chain resilience; third, investing in and connecting people; fourth, building a sustainable and green future; and fifth, positioning Canada as an active and engaged partner in the Indo-Pacific (Government of Canada, 2022). Although Canada has a comparative advantage and achievements at multilateral forums such as the United Nations, the Commonwealth, and the Francophonie in the field of comprehensive peacekeeping and security, Canada should learn how to apply these advantages in the specific mechanisms of ASEAN. Meanwhile, Vietnam is a founding member of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), which has been selected as a training ground for United Nations peacekeeping forces in Southeast Asia. In 2021, Canada first established a permanent Defense Attaché Office in Vietnam, visiting the Vietnamese peacekeepers, sharing the same view to strongly support peacekeeping, gender equality, and women's empowerment.

Thirdly, Viet Nam has a reputation for its ability to handle crises, therefore, Vietnam can advise effective solutions to Canada to enhance cooperation with ASEAN in supporting the response to major disasters in the region. ASEAN is under pressure to be a centrality and often copes with crises in the region, such as the COVID-19 pandemic recently. Canada can take this opportunity to leverage its advantages in health care to support ASEAN countries. The Trudeau Government highly appreciated Vietnam's strong and proactive measures against the COVID-19 epidemic, considering Vietnam as a model in responding to the pandemic. In discussions with Viet Nam, Canadian officials often affirm the desire to continue working closely with Vietnam on issues of mutual concern at regional and international forums.

Fourthly, Viet Nam towards become a developed, high-income country by 2045, attracting many other middle countries to collaborate in the region, and having good relationships with superpowers and influence small countries. Recently, Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese and South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol visited Viet Nam for the first time in their new position. Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese announced assistance of 105 million Australian dollars for the cooperation with Viet Nam in responding to climate change, energy transition, and infrastructure (Government of Viet Nam, 2023). President Yoon Suk Yeol said that Vietnam is a key partner in the implementation of its Indo-Pacific strategy and South Korea-ASEAN Solidarity Initiative for freedom, peace, and prosperity, affirmed that Korea will cooperate and exchange more closely with Vietnam (Minh Nhat, 2023). As a middle power, Canada should take advantage of the relations with Viet Nam in the context of the 50th anniversary of diplomatic relations in 2023.

Conclusion

Both ASEAN and Canada recognize the importance of working together in multi areas. Canada is looking forward to the adoption of a joint statement to establish Canada's new status as a strategic partnership of ASEAN at the ASEAN - Canada Ministerial Meeting expected in September 2023. In such progress, Viet Nam, as one of the top growing countries in ASEAN and the region with a Comprehensive Partnership with Canada, can further promote and improve its bilateral relation with Canada. Among subjects of cooperation, it is suggestively crucial for Viet Nam to attach its interests to ASEAN, while Canada considers Viet Nam in the broader picture of ASEAN and a bridge for Canada to ASEAN, Canada's relationship with Viet Nam as the base ground for its future stronger cooperation with ASEAN.

Note: Pham Thuy Trang and Nguyen Phu Hai are working at Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Viet Nam. Their research only reflects the personal views and does not represent the relevant agencies and organizations.

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