

The UK's foreign strategy toward ASEAN and prospect of UK - Vietnam relationship post Brexit

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Abstract:

After leaving the European Union (EU), the United Kingdom (UK) needs to re-assert its status as a traditional power on the international stage. To prepare for development in the post-Brexit period, the UK has had many orientations to promote and develop its influence and interests in the world. Since 2016, the three main orientations have been their relationship with the EU, Asia-Pacific, and Africa. Among its partners in Asia, the UK has been making efforts to come up with solutions to strengthen its ties with ASEAN. This paper uses some research methods on international relations, such as policy research methods, in order to clarify the objectives, content, and ways of implementing the UK's foreign policy towards ASEAN in general and Vietnam in particular. This article studies some key features of the position of ASEAN in the UK's foreign strategy and efforts to strengthen the UK - ASEAN relations thereby making some comments on the prospect of the relationship between the UK and Vietnam.

Keywords: ASEAN, Global Britain, post-Brexit, relations, the UK, Vietnam.

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1. Introduction

Since becoming a member of the EU, the UK of Great Britain and North Ireland jointly established their position and role on the international stage as a part of the EU. However, during the decades of being an EU member, the UK did not completely rely on the EU and its relationship with its partners in the world, yet remained one of the world's most influential countries. Indeed, the UK is known as the world's sixth-largest economy with global trade, a sea power, one of five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council, an ally of the United States,

a member of the Commonwealth, as well as being a member of other alliances and partnerships.

After leaving the EU (Brexit), the UK had to promote its own influence and interests around the world. To prepare for the official Brexit, and to promote an international identity for itself, the "Global Britain" strategy was laid out. Being formally launched in October 2016 by Prime Minister Theresa May, "Global Britain" has depicted the UK, after withdrawing from the EU, as "a free, open, inclusive and outward-looking global power" that will play a vital role on the international

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stage. To achieve that goal, “Global Britain” demands reinvestments in its relationships worldwide by “advocating free trade and an international rules-based system” and “using its soft power” to demonstrate its values and advance the nation’s interests. The UK global strategic vision consists of three pillars: “The first pillar of our Global Britain strategy will be to continue to prove that we are the best possible allies, partners and friends with our European neighbours”, then “The next pillar of our Global Britain strategy will be the UK’s role as an energetic champion of free and open trade” and “Finally, the third pillar of our Global Britain will be the UK as an even stronger force for good in the world” [1]. The Kingdom has advocated free trade for centuries, and today EU and the USA are its two largest markets. In recent years, to prepare for the new stage of an independent UK’s development, there is a number of aspirations that the Kingdom needs to fulfill around the world of which the first priority is “investment in all our relationships across Europe”, and the second is deepening the ties with the ally United States “in the area of trade” [2]. The UK also seeks to strengthen and expand its partners worldwide, of which, Asia is listed in the UK’s aspirations and its “All of Asia policy” needs to be developed.

In Asia, the UK determines three main partners, which are China, India, and the ASEAN. To strengthen the UK’s presence in this rapidly growing continent, the UK’s government has introduced an “All of Asia” policy, which includes enhanced relationships with China, India, and Southeast Asia and affirms that they are “committed

to strengthening our relationship with [the regional bloc ASEAN] after EU Brexit” [2]. Thus, besides the two powers China and India, the UK has been trying to achieve a closer relationship with ASEAN to access the potential to become an important partner of the association.

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Materials

The paper uses primary and secondary sources from reliable sources of the UK, ASEAN, and Vietnam related to the development of policies and strategic orientations and refers to research by other scholars to analyse relationships in the fields of politics-diplomacy, economy, security-defence, etc., between the UK and ASEAN as well as the UK - Vietnam relationship.

2.2. Methods

The paper uses an approach based on theoretical frameworks on international relations including realism, liberalism with basic arguments about the nation, power issues, national interests, the issue of harmonisation of interests to explain the UK’s foreign policy with ASEAN, and especially analysis based on the UK’s role and position in the international system after leaving the EU.

This paper also applies a systems approach because Vietnam is a part of ASEAN in particular and the Indo-Pacific in general and is affected by the UK’s foreign policy implementation. Meanwhile, the UK’s foreign policy is also a system of which the policy towards ASEAN and Vietnam is a large component.

This paper uses some research methods on international relations, such as policy research methods, in order to clarify the objectives, content, and ways of implementing the UK's foreign policy towards ASEAN in general and Vietnam in particular.

3. Literature review

Since the UK government made its decision to exit the EU in 2016, there have been articles related to UK's foreign policy changes toward the EU and other allies and partners all over the world. In recent years, there have also been some works directly concerned about the relationship between the UK and ASEAN, in general, and UK - Vietnam relations, in particular.

Regarding the multifaceted relationship between the UK and ASEAN, several articles have been published, such as I. Storey (2019) [3], "The United Kingdom and Southeast Asia after Brexit", and T.T.K. Ha (2020) [4], "Prospects of UK - ASEAN relationship after Brexit". The former explores the UK's efforts to enhance its influence and interests all over the world including its engagements in Southeast Asia, specifically, seeking to formalise a new relation with ASEAN, strengthening bilateral bonds with each bloc's member, and raising its defence presentation in the region. However, the article leaves the possibility of the UK's success open because ASEAN's response depends on its consideration of the UK's role and contribution to the security and prosperity of the region. The latter article examines outlooks of the UK - ASEAN and UK - Vietnam relations in the post-Brexit era.

Findings show that the prospect of cooperation is positive as the UK is an important partner of the Association as a whole and Vietnam in particular through strong economic, political, and military ties as well as potentials from parties.

Other works have concentrated on the economic ties between the UK and ASEAN, J. Haacke, et al. (2018) [5], *Future options for the UK - ASEAN economic relationship*, is a briefing for a workshop co-organised by the UK - ASEAN Business Council (UKABC) and the LSE Saw Swee Hock Southeast Asia Centre (LSE SEAC) that was held on June 27, 2018. The paper examines the UK's economic performance with Southeast Asia, the EU context to UK relations with Southeast Asia, and concentrates on future options for the UK - ASEAN economic relationships such as a multilateral UK - ASEAN Free Trade Agreement (FTA), bilateral FTAs with each member country, or Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP).

In an article by L.A. Reumann (2019) [6], "ASEAN's European trade relations in the wake of Brexit", the author examined how Brexit will affect ASEAN and its member states in terms of European trade, and its impact on the UK's and EU's trade relations with Southeast Asia. The findings show that ASEAN's financial markets and trade configurations will not be affected. The bloc and its members will also think about political and security aspects as Britain tries to become an independent trading actor after Brexit.

J. Wood, et al. (2017) [7] in their work titled “Brexit: The economic and political implications for Asia” provide a brief synopsis of Britain’s decision to leave the EU. Then, offer a detailed analysis of how the Brexit decision will impact the Asian region. As part of this discussion, a series of relevant policy issues are considered.

On the British military presence in the Southeast Asia region, there is an article by L. Jianwei, et al. (2019) [8] named “British naval activities in the South China Sea: A double-edged sword?” that focuses on the emerging presence of the British navy in the region that poses a threat in some perspectives. It also mentions Vietnam as a UK significant partner.

The present article systematically analyses, from the UK’s perspective on UK - ASEAN and UK - Vietnam relations and especially from official UK and ASEAN documents, efforts to build formal relations between the UK and ASEAN post-Brexit, which has not been mentioned in many texts.

4. The position of ASEAN in the new strategy of the UK

ASEAN, an association with 10 member countries, is a potential partner for the UK. The association of these 10 Southeast Asian countries covers a total area of 4.46 million square kilometres, accounts for 3% of the total land area of Earth, and has a large sea area that is especially important for global trade flow, which has always attracted the attention of other countries and world powers. The 10 countries combined have created a common

political voice that cannot be ignored. Indeed, ASEAN plays an increasingly important role in maintaining stability and development of the Asia-Pacific region and the world. As a result, ASEAN warrants Britain’s spotlight during their post-Brexit period. Therefore, in recent years, the UK has focused its foreign policy on ASEAN, in addition to China and India, and has considered the importance of ASEAN in the UK’s relations to the region and the world at the same time [9, 10]. This stems from several reasons:

First, the UK needs to establish its international status as an independent power in the post-Brexit period, then the UK has to present and participate with different regions of the world. Practice shows that, in the Asia-Pacific region, ASEAN plays an increasingly important role, and it is an indispensable partner in the regional policies of external actors, especially large countries. More broadly, the UK sees ASEAN as a group of 10 influential members in the Indo - Pacific region. Therefore, the UK, with its new global strategic vision, will not pass up the opportunity to have a more active presence in this region. The UK already has relatively close relationships with many countries in the region and multilateral cooperation with ASEAN. This is a strong point that the UK will take advantage of for a new phase of development.

Second, the UK has many interests related to the East Sea, and a deep relationship with ASEAN would be more favourable for British activities in the region. Britain was once the

dominant sea power since the seventeenth century, but after World War II, in search of a new direction of development, Britain gave up efforts to maintain its maritime hegemony by abandoning the pursuit of the “one-world economic system” policy in which the British pound was a central currency [11]. Instead, Britain prioritised integration with European countries in the European Economic Community (EEC). At the time, Britain believed that the EEC had strong growth potential and that Britain could expand its influence by becoming a member of the bloc. In addition to its obligations, the UK would also enjoy great benefits from being a member of the EEC.

Returning to the identity of an independent country, the UK must prove its extreme strength and promote its advantage of being a sea power, especially when the Kingdom’s economy is heavily dependent on seaborne trade (with 95% of UK trade being based in the maritime sector) [12] in which the East Sea plays a meaningful role. According to a report by The Henry Jackson Society, “nearly 12% of UK seaborne trade - £97 billion in imports and exports - passes through the south China sea each year” [13]. This volume is certainly not the highest as Southeast Asian economies continue to strongly develop and surely account for a higher share of the international economy in the future. In addition, this region is the third-largest market for Britain defence exports. Thus, maintaining the safety and security of the East Sea is of great importance to the UK.

Therefore, Asia, especially the Pacific - Asia region, plays an important role in the UK’s interests. In particular, the East Sea, which is the shortest route connecting the Indian Ocean with the Pacific Ocean, is the gateway for international trade. It is also a gateway for Britain’s commercial relations with Southeast and East Asian countries. Thus, close cooperation with ASEAN countries will be very beneficial to Britain’s presence in this area.

Third, ASEAN is a promising market for British high-end exports. After Brexit, the UK will lose its preferences in the intra-EU market and will need to expand its ties with global trading partners as well as strongly promote its highly open economy to compensate for this loss. The UK needs to strengthen its global trade links, in which ASEAN - a fast-growing and dynamic economic region - is an important partner for Britain’s trade relations as demonstrated by: i) ASEAN is the fifth largest economy with an estimated combined GDP of over 3 trillion USD (it is forecasted that by 2030, ASEAN will rank fourth after the EU, the US and China) and already is the world’s third-most populous region with 650 million people; and ii) over the last ten years, trade between the UK and ASEAN has grown by almost 70%, reaching nearly 42 billion GBP [14].

In 2019, two-way trade between Britain and ASEAN reached 41.7 billion GBP, an increase of 12.2% compared to 2018. The total value of Britain’s exports to ASEAN was 11.4 billion GBP (58.4% of goods, 41.6% of services), and

its imports from ASEAN were 22.3 billion GBP (70.2% of goods, 29.8% of services) [4]. The UK is one of the top 10 investors in ASEAN. Southeast Asia is the UK's third-largest non-EU export market. Furthermore, Southeast Asia is the UK's third-largest export market for defence products. Indeed, the strong growth in the region presents many opportunities for British businesses.

Accordingly, we can see the importance of ASEAN to the UK in the post-Brexit period. Global Britain's strategy poses three of the UK's main Indo-Pacific partners including China, India, and ASEAN, respectively [2]. As a part of the preparations for a new phase of development, the UK has worked to foster a formal relationship with the Association.

5. Promoting the UK - ASEAN relations

“For the first time in post-war history, the British Parliament is taking steps to reverse decades of economic and political orientation towards Europe, in favour of re-igniting its own relations with the countries of East Asia and the Pacific rim” [15].

Historically, the UK has played an important role in Southeast Asia, and it now still maintains a regular presence in the region. During its integration process in the EU, besides being a dialogue partner of ASEAN through the Union, the UK also had independent activities in the region. Therefore, Britain's return to seeking influence in Southeast Asia in the process of preparing for Brexit is understandable and predictable. The UK now seeks to gain ASEAN's dialogue partnership.

Britain hopes to become the 11th ASEAN dialogue partner to promote economic growth, social progress, and cooperation in the region, which will create new opportunities for cooperation in trade, education, science, and security. According to British Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab:

“As Asia grows in importance, Global Britain will cooperate even more closely with our friends in the region. We aim to boost trade by joining the Trans-Pacific trade agreement. And by becoming one of ASEAN's Dialogue Partners, we can strengthen our ability to cooperate across the Indo-Pacific region, as a force for good, on everything from climate change to regional stability” [16].

The appointment of a UK ambassador to ASEAN (previously concurrently held by the UK ambassador to Indonesia), then the launch of the UK mission to ASEAN, along with diplomatic missions in its 10 member countries, shows that the UK appreciates the importance of ASEAN and wants to reshape the relationship with an association in the context of current development. The UK also wants to discuss extensive cooperation programs with ASEAN including measures to respond to global pandemics, climate change, and terrorism, etc.

This begs the question: How will the UK shape its relationship with ASEAN? After the official Brexit time (December 31, 2020), this country would no longer be a dialogue partner of ASEAN through the EU. Given the existing

relationships with ASEAN and recognising the increasing importance of Southeast Asia, Britain does not want to lose its status as an ASEAN dialogue partner. As Asia and Pacific Secretary Heather Wheeler noted, ASEAN would be a “key partner” for London after it leaves the EU [17]. On June 5, 2020, the UK’s government issued a statement proposing to become a dialogue partner of ASEAN. The establishment of a dialogue partnership as an independent country would give Britain new opportunities for cooperation in many fields such as trade, education, science, and security.

On the other hand, the UK can be seen as a goodwill partner in the region as it is a major development partner of Southeast Asia. Over the last 10 years, the UK has provided more than 3.5 billion GBP of ODA in the region. Indeed, the UK’s Intellectual Property Office (IPO) assists ASEAN countries in building a rules-based intellectual property system. The UK Better Health Program (BHP) will be operating until September 2022 with a total investment of GBP 20.3 million (USD 25.4 million) in five ASEAN members including Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam for better healthcare systems. The UK currently has cooperated with the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on Disaster Management (AHA Centre) in Jakarta (Indonesia) and the ASEAN - Singapore Cyber Security Centre of Excellence. In addition, since 2018, the UK has supported the ASEAN Economic Reform Programme

(worth 19 million GBP) and the ASEAN Low Carbon Energy Programme (worth 15 million GBP). It has also helped Southeast Asian countries to deal with climate change [18].

The UK also has a lot of potentials to contribute to regional security and stability. More importantly, the COVID-19 epidemic has further enhanced the value of the UK. With its advanced medical achievements and vaccine development, the UK will be able to bring many benefits to ASEAN. In addition, the UK pledged to provide 1 million GBP to the ASEAN COVID-19 Response Fund [18].

Besides the favourable conditions for Britain to become a dialogue partner of ASEAN, there are also obstacles. The voice that wants to retain the moratorium on dialogue partners believes that admitting the UK, a former colonial master of four of the ASEAN’s members, could bring unknown consequences [19]. Meanwhile, granting dialogue partner status, as well as suspending it, also involves designing the foreign policy of its members and major partners to ensure a sustainable strategic balance between the parties.

In addition, disputes in the East Sea have become increasingly fierce and have attracted the attention of many external forces. It is suggested that, while ASEAN countries are more and more concerned about the increasingly tense competition between China and the US in the region.

“The perception of the UK’s enhanced military presence will undoubtedly

cause concerns about increased external militarization in the region, which will not be welcomed by ASEAN. Such perceptions will have serious repercussions for the UK itself, and negatively affect its promotion of Global Britain in a broader sense” [8].

Otherwise, in disputed issues in the region, especially those about the East Sea, Britain has resolutely opposed activities that violate the sovereignty and interests of other countries and those that go against international law. This is in line with the interests of some Southeast Asian countries related to maritime and island disputes. The UK is increasingly concerned about security and freedom of navigation in the region, in particular, and around the world, in general, and has shown its readiness to deploy military forces in the region if the security situation in the region deteriorates.

In addition, there are also some questions about the extent to which the UK can contribute to Southeast Asia when it has other potential priorities in the post-Brexit period.

Regarding free trade agreements, when leaving the EU, Britain is no longer a partner of the two FTAs that the EU signed with two members of ASEAN, namely the EU - Singapore FTA (EUSFTA) and EU - Vietnam FTA (EVFTA), as well as not a participant in the FTAs that EU is negotiating with other ASEAN members. Because ASEAN is certainly a potential market for British high-value exports, Britain has therefore actively negotiated to sign FTAs with Singapore and

Vietnam separately, based on the principle of inheriting commitments of EUSFTA and EVFTA, along with necessary changes to ensure that the bilateral trade framework between partners is properly complied with.

The two FTAs, including the UK - Singapore FTA (UKSFTA) and the UK - Vietnam FTA (UKVFTA) signed on December 10, 2020, and December 29, 2020, respectively, have been urgently completed by the parties to comply with the provisions of each party's laws to ensure the implementation of these FTAs from 11 pm on December 31, 2020. These bilateral FTAs create favourable conditions for promoting the economic recovery of member countries after the COVID-19 crisis. UKSFTA and UKVFTA are considered as positive factors promoting bilateral economic and trade relations between UK - Singapore, and UK - Vietnam. At the same time, it has a positive effect for the UK to expand economic and trade cooperation with the association, especially when other bilateral FTAs between the UK and other Asian partners are unlikely to be signed in the next few years.

In addition, the UK has an active military presence in ASEAN under the Five-Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA), which includes five members: Australia, Malaysia, Singapore, New Zealand, and the UK, while there are still some units of the UK military in Brunei in order support and train Brunei's army. Thus, there is an increased regular presence of British troops in the East Sea to protect important UK economic and political interests in the Asia - Pacific [4].

When the UK's government issued a notice requesting to become a dialogue partner of ASEAN on June 5, 2020, ASEAN began to consider and debate this proposal. After the consultation process within ASEAN and between ASEAN and the UK, the Chairman's Press Release on the ASEAN - UK Open-Ended Troika Meeting on April 8, 2021, stated:

"... noted the publication of the UK's Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy. The meeting welcomed the UK's commitment to strengthening ties with ASEAN, including through the UK's application for ASEAN Dialogue Partner status. The meeting looked forward to continued and closer cooperation between ASEAN and the UK, and further strengthening the ASEAN - UK relationship towards achieving common interests in order to accelerate sustainable socio-economic growth of the region" [20].

One month later, on August 5, 2021, ASEAN officially granted its dialogue partner status for the UK. This action broke the block's moratorium on adding dialogue partners since 1999 when ASEAN decided to deepen existing relationships instead of expanding dialogue partners.

This decision, on the one hand, showed positivity and openness in ASEAN's foreign relations while, on the other hand, showed that ASEAN highly values the UK's role and contributions in the region and highly appreciates its commitments and potential for cooperation in political-security, economic,

and socio-cultural aspects. After becoming a full dialogue partner of ASEAN, the UK is expected to promote its role and strength to bring the ASEAN - UK relations to a substantive development and contribute to peace, security, stability, and prosperity in the region [21, 22].

The UK considers ASEAN and Southeast Asia to be important parts of its global foreign policy as mentioned while committing to attach importance to ASEAN's central role in regional priorities. Cooperation priorities include economic cooperation, promoting green growth, building sustainable infrastructure to adapt to climate change, and responding to emerging regional and global challenges. The UK is also ready to enhance cooperation with ASEAN in the response to and control of the COVID-19 pandemic by providing vaccines for ASEAN and supporting the region to improve preventive medicine capacity. Emphasising the strengthening of maritime cooperation, the UK and ASEAN will enhance maritime law enforcement capabilities that contribute to upholding the value and role of international law, especially the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) [23].

6. Prospects for the development of UK - Vietnam relations

The UK and Vietnam officially established diplomatic relations in 1973, but it's only from the 1990s when the two countries' relations turned into reality. Then, in 1995, Vietnam joined the ASEAN. Thus, in addition to the

bilateral relationship, the bonds between the two countries have also been shaped within the framework of the EU - ASEAN multilateral relationship. In this regard, the authors consider the UK - Vietnam relation development to date correlating to the UK's relations with ASEAN and other members.

On September 8, 2010, representatives of the UK and Vietnam signed a Joint Statement officially upgrading the UK - Vietnam relations to a strategic partnership, which created a framework for the comprehensive development of bilateral relations. The seven major areas of cooperation include politics-diplomacy, global and regional affairs, trade-investment, development cooperation, socio-economics, education training, security-defence, and people-to-people exchanges. At the same time, cooperation was promoted at multilateral forums and especially at the United Nations, WTO, ASEAN - EU, and ASEM. Therefore, the two sides are committed to strongly strengthening economic-trade-investment cooperation between the two countries.

In recent years, economic cooperation between Vietnam and the UK has developed remarkably. In 2019, the total import-export value between the two countries was approximately 6.6 billion USD, of which Vietnam exported more than 5.75 billion USD and imported 857 million USD. In 2020, despite impacts of COVID-19, the total trade turnover between Vietnam and the UK was estimated to have reached 5.64 billion USD of which Vietnam's exports and imports

were estimated to reach 4.95 billion and 687 million USD, respectively [24]. In the first five months of 2021, Vietnam exports were worth 2.36 billion USD to the UK, while imports from the UK were worth 325 million USD. This decline in 2021 was due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic as consumption in both countries has been decreasing. Currently, the UK is Vietnam's third-largest trading partner in Europe and Vietnam's ninth-largest export market in the world. In addition, Vietnam enjoys a large trade surplus from the UK.

According to the Ambassador of Vietnam Hoang Long Nguyen to the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, the bilateral relationship between Vietnam and the UK is in the best stage so far but still has a lot of potential for further development [25]. While the two countries' markets have a very high level of complementarity, and the UK is a leading importer and exporter in the world, the total value of Vietnam's exports to the UK only accounts for 0.88% of the UK's total imports while UK goods exported to Vietnam account for only 0.17% of its total value of goods exported worldwide. In the field of foreign direct investment, there are 400 valid investment projects of UK investors in Vietnam with a total registered investment of 3.6 billion USD making this country the 16th largest investor among Vietnam's 137 partner countries and territories. This amount of money is quite small compared to the total 300 billion USD that the UK invests all over the world. On the other side, Vietnamese investors have run nine projects with total

registered capital of 11.5 million USD in the UK [26]. The UKVFTA is expected to create more advantages for economic cooperation between the two countries. The two countries have set a target of doubling the bilateral trade value to 10 billion USD within the next five years. The potential for the UK - Vietnam trade cooperation is still very significant in the context that Vietnam, a large potential market, is entering a new stage of economic development with a goal of GDP per capita reaching 3,500 USD by 2025, and to double it to 7,000 USD by 2030. As one of Vietnam's leading partners, the UK can meet Vietnam's economic development needs in fields of strength such as science and technology [25]. However, achieving these targets acquire efforts at all levels from the government to business.

In Vietnam, the UK is stepping up its support for inclusive and sustainable economic growth. Over the next three years, the UK will launch programs to develop low-carbon energy, infrastructure, and promote health and trade reforms. The UK government is also working closely with the government of Vietnam on fighting corruption in the private sector, reforming the economy and governance, as well as finding better ways to raise capital for public investment.

Generally, this special interest is aligned with the UK's relations with its largest Asian partners. Since August 2021, the UK has officially become one of ASEAN's dialogue partners, which shows that the bloc recognises its increasingly important role in the region.

On the UK side, strengthening ties with ASEAN as a whole and each member country of the Association separately is relevant to its "All of Asia" strategy. This is why the UK has 11 diplomatic missions in ASEAN so far.

UK's largest partner in ASEAN is Singapore, and it is considered as a gateway for the UK to enter the ASEAN market. While Vietnam is perceived as an important strategic partner of the UK and also considered a strong driver of ASEAN's international trade, the UKVFTA brings great opportunities for economic cooperation between the two countries. Vietnam must make every effort to make good use of opportunities and advantages in the UK - Vietnam strategic partnership, especially in the context that the economies have been hit hard by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The UKVFTA was signed and took effect just before Brexit (along with UKSFTA), and that is recognised as a strategic step of the UK. Both Vietnam and the UK can benefit from opening their markets to each other. Vietnam's economy relies on exports, so expanding economic ties with the UK is one of Hanoi's priorities after the UK's withdrawal from the EU. On the British side, after Brexit, the country needs to step up market diversification through a series of agreement tracks, while negotiating a new trade agreement with the EU is more difficult and complicated.

Furthermore, Brexit is an opportunity to reshape and strengthen UK relationships, and this is also the case for the strategic partnership between Vietnam and the UK. In recent

years, there have been visits by UK officials that aim to deepen cooperation between the two sides across many fields. Both parties will continue to consult each other about the UK's negotiation process to become a member of the CPTPP. After Brexit, the UK needs the ASEAN market and its member states. In our opinion, if a bilateral FTA between the UK and any other Asian country is not feasible in the near future, the possibility of signing an FTA between the UK and ASEAN is even more difficult.

The UK is also an increasingly important partner of Vietnam. It is also an advantage for the UK while Vietnam is implementing the foreign policy of diversification, multilateralisation of international relations, and maintaining balance among partners. British opposition to China's destabilising actions in the East Sea, as well as the UK's military presence in the region, will contribute to curbing illegal Chinese activities in the sea area with core interests of Vietnam [4, 27]. The UK supports the early signing of the East Sea Code of Conduct (internationally known as the Code of Conduct for the South China Sea) by ASEAN and China.

In general, both Vietnam and the UK attach great importance to the bilateral relationship between the two countries and are willing to deepen cooperation in all fields. Now that the UK has officially become a dialogue partner of ASEAN, with the contribution of Vietnam's 2020 ASEAN Chairmanship the possibility of bilateral and multilateral

cooperation of the two countries is even more open. However, more time is needed to evaluate it.

7. Conclusions

When the UK leaves the EU, Southeast Asia, with its economic, political, and strategic importance, is an area of great significance for the UK to enhance cooperation. ASEAN lies at the heart of Asian multilateralism and plays an important role in maintaining a rules-based international system. A challenge for the UK will be to develop a clear policy towards Southeast Asia that takes into account the UK's broader security and geopolitical interests while enhancing its comprehensive relationship with this region. The UK must also balance a long-term strategy to engage ASEAN through the pursuit of new FTAs with member countries of the association along with an increased military presence in the region.

Becoming ASEAN's full dialogue partner is a big step that marks the UK's deep attachment to the region after Brexit. Moreover, this event is a turning point in the UK's strategy towards the Indo - Pacific region, and also affirms the influence of ASEAN in Britain's Indo - Pacific policy.

For Vietnam, the Vietnam - UK strategic partnership has been developed for more than a decade and the relationship between Vietnam and the UK has grown substantially as both sides have actively cooperated, which includes the exchange of experience in sea operations of the two navies. The bilateral

FTAs that the UK signed with Singapore and Vietnam, which quickly came into force, are seen as an effort to strengthen relations with Southeast Asian countries, while the UK is also trying to become a member of the CPTPP. The UK has also repeatedly made it clear that developing comprehensive relations with Vietnam is one of its priorities, and, in turn, this is an opportunity for Vietnam to further strengthen its strategic partnership with the UK.

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COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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