

Reconciling Nation and Region: Vietnamese Nation Building and ASEAN Regionalism

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The article sets out to gauge the usefulness of the concepts of legitimacy, sovereignty and nation in theorising a specific, South-East Asian case of nation building. It looks at the interplay between nation building and regionalist ideology in Vietnam, within the context of the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN). As one of the world's last communist states, the way in which Vietnam has reconciled hard-won sovereignty with regionalisation is all the more intriguing. The article distinguishes the state-led ideology of regionalism from the macro-level process of regionalisation in charting how sovereignty, legitimacy and nation are constructed in the Vietnamese case, with a view to drawing parallels with experiences in other regions. The first section looks at the concepts of legitimacy, sovereignty and nation and how they underpin the state construct, before relating these to Vietnam's ongoing nation-building project in the second section. The final section evaluates the evolution of these concepts within a regional framework, with specific reference to Vietnam's experience as a member of ASEAN. It concludes that official nation building in Vietnam continues to be based on the premises of state sovereignty and legitimacy, an approach eminently compatible with 'the ASEAN way'. The Vietnamese Communist party seeks to reconcile regionalism with its ongoing nation-building project in a bid to bolster both domestic legitimacy and external sovereignty.

Within the 'nation-state' construct, the hyphen linking the two concepts represents legitimacy. The state needs the nation to legitimate its authority, through the legal fiction of popular sovereignty in a democracy, or via representatives of a national community such as a single political party or an authoritarian leader. Contemporary phenomena such as globalisation, immigration and regionalisation have led to claims of a so-called 'crisis of the hyphen' (Anderson, cited in McCrone, 1998, p. 173), where the link between the state and its legitimating national community is weakened by a dilution of community identity and/or state authority. State sovereignty is variously described as being pooled, transferred or lost through international treaties or the intervention of market forces in a 'zero-sum game' (Geddes, 2004, p. 40; Sutherland, 2005b). These dynamics are difficult to grasp, let alone measure in the case of abstract, theoretical concepts, the meaning of which may vary according to political culture and expediency.

This article sets out to disentangle the concepts of legitimacy, sovereignty and nation building from some of their normative accretions, in order to gauge their usefulness in theorising a specific, South-East Asian case. It does not claim to do so in any objective or universalising sense, but explores instead the way in which nation building and regionalism are reconciled in Vietnam, within the regional

context of the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN). The first section looks at the concepts of legitimacy, sovereignty and nation and how they underpin the state construct. The second section then relates these to Vietnam's ongoing nation-building project. The final section goes on to evaluate the evolution of these concepts in an era of regionalisation, with specific reference to Vietnam's membership of ASEAN. This choice of case enables us to chart how the concepts of sovereignty, legitimacy and nation are constructed in a post-colonial context, with a view to making cross-country comparisons in future.

Constructivist approaches in the international relations literature on South-East Asia seek to complement or challenge (neo-)realist analyses of ASEAN by giving more weight to its ideational aspects (Acharya and Stubbs, 2006, p. 126). Although the present article is also concerned with ideology and identity, its focus is different. The question here is not 'Is ASEAN powerful?' (Eaton and Stubbs, 2006) but 'How powerful a symbol is ASEAN in Vietnamese nation building?'. It thereby complements works of international relations (Narine, 2004; 2006) with one rooted in nationalism studies. The actual course of regional cooperation and integration may well run parallel to its rhetorical role in national discourse, but its presentation for domestic consumption as a component of nation building is the primary concern here. Of the 'three principal elements behind the political cooperation in Southeast Asia – namely external threat, internal stability and economic development' (Palmujoki, 2001, p. 7), the present article focuses on the ideational aspects of the second, or the manner in which state-led discourse responds to perceived threats to its internal legitimacy. Specifically, it examines the interplay of nationalism and regionalism from the perspective of Vietnam's ideological, nation-building discourse. In contrasting the European Union (EU) and ASEAN, Eero Palmujoki (2001, p. 2) notes: '[O]ld regionalism is characterized by the tendency towards integration, federalism, and diminishing national sovereignty. On the other hand, two other tendencies drive new regionalism – nationalism and interdependence'.

In the same way as globalism 'makes normative claims about a set of social processes called "globalization"' (Steger, 2005, p. 6; *cf.* Hay and Rosamond, 2002), regionalism operates at the analytical level of state ideology rather than the macro level of regionalisation. It is an order of discourse (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2000) which might present regionalisation as either 'rescuing' (Milward, 1994) or undermining the nation-state. As such, it combines both cognitive and policy features of 'regional awareness and identity' and 'state-promoted regional integration' (Hurrell, 1995, pp. 41–3). The present discussion revolves around regionalism's contribution to nation building, as a political project interpreting regionalisation processes for domestic consumption. Whether actual transfers of sovereignty take place is thus less important than the symbolic role ASEAN plays as one further instance of the 'invention of tradition' (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983) so central to nation building. It is submitted that constructs such as 'the ASEAN way' and assertions of regional identity (Sutherland, 2005b) serve to

underpin Vietnam's external sovereignty and, by extension, its domestic legitimacy.

If governance is defined as 'the exercise of political, economic and administrative authority to manage a *nation's* affairs' (United Nations Development Programme, cited in Kerkvliet, 2004, p. 1, emphasis added), then the present global conjuncture suggests it is in states' interest to engage in 'projects like regionalism ... to accelerate, to modify or occasionally to reverse the direction of social change which processes like globalization and regionalization represent' (Gamble, 2001, p. 27; see also Palmujoki, 2001, p. 6). It is important to emphasise the extent to which regionalism serves member state interests, especially in the case of ASEAN. In Shaun Narine's analysis:

[D]omestic political legitimacy in most Asia-Pacific states is the key variable explaining their reluctance to create strong regional institutions. This concern with legitimacy underpins the region's determination to defend the traditional Westphalian principles of state sovereignty ... This focus on sovereignty is a manifestation of a deeper concern: ... creating national identities out of disparate ethnic, religious and linguistic communities (Narine, 2004, p. 424, emphasis in original).

The present article explores this hypothesis in a specific country case.

The empirical analysis focuses on Vietnam's Communist party ideology in discussing how the Vietnamese government attempts to integrate a regional identity into a national construct, in order to bolster the legitimacy of the one-party state. Despite pursuing a policy of economic opening since the 1980s and reconfiguring its international alliances away from the crumbling 'socialist brotherhood', the Vietnamese government continues to propagate a political mythology premised on national unity, patriotism and defence. As one of the world's last communist states, the way in which it has reconciled hard-won sovereignty with regionalisation is all the more intriguing. Vietnam's experience shows us how government discourse can turn political expediency into an ideological affirmation of national sovereignty and legitimacy. It remains to be seen whether the theoretical concepts underpinning this discursive sleight of hand are sufficiently flexible to admit such an interpretation.

Legitimacy, Sovereignty, Nation

At the institutional level, legitimacy can be defined as 'the moral authority or normative standing *required* by a public authority engaged in the production of binding rules and allocations' (Beetham and Lord, cited in Bache and George, 2006, p. 67, emphasis in original). A broader and more normative term than authority, the concept of legitimacy can thus be linked to ideas of virtue, trust and righteousness. It should be distinguished from legality, which is more narrowly related to officially sanctioned systems, rules and principles, whatever their value. A further distinction can be drawn between propriety and validity, namely

whether an individual believes something is right or simply acceptable (Johnson *et al.*, 2006; Narine, 2004, p. 427). For instance, it has been pointed out that ‘in Southeast Asia and elsewhere, a people have accepted the rule of a common administration without transferring their ultimate loyalty to it’ (McAlister, 1973, p. 6). Whether an individual believes authority to be right and good or merely tolerable, there must be a wider degree of collective consent for a leader or a regime to be considered legitimate. Without this, political stability is endangered.

In a similar way to the customer loyalty courted by businesses, political leaders and systems must enjoy a certain level of legitimacy to avoid their collapse (Sutherland, 2006a). In liberal democracies, this is sought through regular elections, representing the will of the people, otherwise known as the *demos* or the nation. However, alternative interpretations of the nation such as those championed by sub-state nationalists may challenge the existing legitimating link between nation and state (Keating, 2001a; Sutherland, 2005a). In their study of legitimacy as a social process, Cathryn Johnson *et al.* (2006) discuss four stages of legitimation, namely innovation, local validation, diffusion and general validation. Sub-state nationalists must build up legitimacy through each of these stages, in opposition to the dominant state interpretation. Nation building on behalf of an existing state, on the other hand, involves the general validation and maintenance of myths of unity and common identity underpinning the existing nation-state construct.

Theorists of nationalism, including those ‘ethno-symbolists’ who emphasise links to much older markers of belonging (Smith, 1986), recognise the creation of nations as a modern, nineteenth-century innovation taking place in the context of European industrialisation (Gellner, 1983) and burgeoning anti-colonialism elsewhere (Anderson, 1991). In this sense, nation building ‘is the creation of new and unified nations out of ancient societies having long histories of cultural fragmentation and political divisiveness’ (McAlister, 1973, p. 4). It is emphatically not a return to a previous golden age of ‘natural’ unity, but the construction of a new form of political organisation. Far from the neat metaphor of laying bricks and mortar which the term might suggest, nation building is a messy process of identity manipulation bound up with the quest for legitimacy and sovereignty. It takes place through institutions such as schools, military conscription, taxation, political parties and representative bodies (Weber, 1977). Museums, national holidays, heroes and official rhetoric also contribute to continuous nation-building efforts (Hue-Tam, 2001). These ‘sedimented discourses’ (Howarth, 1995, p. 132) can often be traced to attempts by governments and political leaders to establish their interpretation of the nation; even warlords have used museums to institutionalise their view of national struggle (Milosevic, 2006). In addition to this are self-perpetuating forms of Foucauldian ‘capillary power’ or ‘governmentality’ (Barrett, 1991, p. 142; Foucault *et al.*, 1991, p. 103) transmitted through the media, social mores and countless other forms of ‘banal nationalism’ (Billig, 1995). Together, they serve to instil in the individual a sense of belonging to the nation, though this is by no means an exclusive identity.

Some anti-EU ‘Eurosceptics’ in the United Kingdom would have us believe that national sovereignty is incompatible with European integration (Geddes, 2004, p. 194). However, the very process of nation building is itself a form of integration premised on nested – rather than divided – loyalties:

National integration, therefore, is a shift or sharing of sovereignties. Instead of looking upon his [*sic*] kinship group, village or ethnic identity as being the ultimate source of status and highest form of loyalty, an individual begins to find possibilities of being loyal to a community called the nation without compromising his sense of loyalty to family or village (McAlister, 1973, p. 6).

This analysis links sovereignty to anthropology, which has recently seen a resurgence in study of the concept (Hansen and Stepputat, 2006). However, the present focus is on political sovereignty as an abstract justification of authority rather than *de facto* sovereignty, or the power to act rooted in violence. Legitimacy is intimately linked to sovereignty in that recognition is crucial in both cases. Internal sovereignty, a state’s recognised authority to act within its own borders, is complemented by external sovereignty, or the international recognition of this authority by other states.

The term ‘post-sovereignty’ indicates ‘that sovereignty in its traditional sense, in which it is identified exclusively with the independent state, is no more. Rather there are multiple sites of “sovereign”, in the sense of original, authority’ (Keating, 2001b, p. 162). State governments are faced with the challenge of responding to this in their continuing pursuit of national legitimacy. The predominantly inter-governmental nature of ASEAN compared to, say, the European Union, and a different pattern of popular accountability, suggest that nation builders will do so differently depending on the regional and domestic context (Jáuregui, 1999). Yet Michael Mann’s (1993, p. 115) assessment of states as ‘diversifying, developing, not dying’ is testament to their resilience. Their potential to command domestic legitimacy is affected, but not precluded, by their privileged position within international relations. It has been noted that ‘any attempt to break away from nationalist narrative is often criticized on the grounds that it would guarantee no stability, undermine the sense of a common identity and be accompanied by low levels of trust’ (Kostakopoulou, 2006, p. 74). The implications for state legitimacy are clear, and governments increasingly seek to reconcile nationalist and regionalist discourse.

The nation is not the only or necessary legitimating construct imaginable. It has been argued, for instance, that citizenship regimes should be linked to residence rather than evidence of national belonging (Kostakopoulou, 2006, p. 93). This would amount to decoupling the natural body, capable of love, loyalty, patriotic emotion and sacrifice, from the political body as holder of rights and duties (Hansen and Stepputat, 2006, p. 297). In the same way, there could eventually be a move away from national belonging as a source of legitimacy to ‘post-national’ configurations (Soysal, 1994; compare Klopp, 2002). Jürgen Habermas’

interpretation of constitutional patriotism, though not reflected in current German citizenship legislation, is one variation on this theme (Till, 2005, p. 130). Yet governments are keen to pre-empt the decoupling of legitimacy from emotional expressions of belonging which are so central to the 'nation-state' construct. We turn to Vietnamese nation building and its construction of regionalism for an illustration of this point.

Nation Building in Vietnam

[T]hrough the lens of sovereignty in practice, colonial rule appears less hegemonic and effective than in its self-presentations in official texts and plans. A key feature of the colonial world was that different kinds and registers of sovereignty coexisted and overlapped (Hansen and Stepputat, 2006, p. 297).

This statement highlights the crucial distinction between 'sovereignty in practice' – which shares the same macro-level register as regionalisation – and official 'self-presentations' – the register of ideological regionalism and this article's subject of analysis. In the nineteenth century, French colonial attempts to reform the established system of Vietnam's village-level administration lightly overlaid with subservience to the king were ultimately unsuccessful, not least because their measures 'did not provide the new local authorities with sufficient legitimacy' (Grosheim, 2004, p. 74). In contrast, Ho Chi Minh's *Viet Minh* – a communist-led league for independence – built up a power base in the countryside from which it eventually defeated the French in 1954. In government, Vietnam's Communist party (VCP) has consolidated control over villages and neighbourhoods through a dense network of party cadres and lesser officials. This section will examine the VCP's nation-building discourse and the sources of its legitimacy.

Not long before his recent death, the eminent anthropologist Clifford Geertz called on academics across the social sciences to rethink the process and consequences of 'Third World nationalism, decolonization, democratization, economic takeoff, modernization' (Geertz, 2004, p. 578) taking place in Africa, the Middle East, Asia and Latin America. Some historians have also taken up the challenge of redefining the South-East Asian region (Leong, 2006, p. 161), argued to be a relatively recent construct (Berger, 2003, p. 423). Geertz went on to problematise the term 'nation building', suggesting that 'the assemblage of large ideas, casually inherited from Western philosophy and political theory, upon which we have tended to rely for initial positioning and analytical guidance is due for re-examination and reconsideration, critique, and overhaul' (Geertz, 2004, p. 579). The Cold War influenced academic understanding of the concepts of nation building and development, in which a dominant narrative of 'progress' towards a democratic 'nation-state' informed area studies in general and the 'shaping' of South-East Asia in particular. It assumed 'the universalisation of the nation-state system' (Berger, 2003, p. 447) on which international relations are still premised

today. As with notions of sovereignty and legitimacy, post-colonial countries are now reinterpreting these concepts in the light of their own interests and experiences.

Abstract terms such as legitimacy and sovereignty are coupled with notions of 'possession' or 'division' in order to grasp their significance and measure their relative strength. This reifies 'the sovereign in its ideal and transcendent form (nation, state, the people), which amounts to "empty places" that never can be fully represented' (Hansen and Stepputat, 2006, p. 301). These concepts remain 'essentially contested' (Gallie, 1962) and their theoretical import must be carefully distinguished from their use as tools of political ideology. The present article seeks to understand their articulation in the contemporary Vietnamese context, which must include the regionalist dimension. It thus assumes their continued relevance as an international *lingua franca* subject to ideological interpretation. Indeed, it is an irony of the colonial experience that anti-colonial nationalists often used the language of their oppressors to organise resistance (Chatterjee, 1993). In turn, ASEAN member states have made sovereignty a fundamental element of their post-colonial credo, and use it to resist any interference in their domestic affairs (Narine, 2002, p. 193). Similarly, challenges to supposedly universal understandings of human rights have come from South-East Asia (Sutherland, 2006b), suggesting that in 'travelling' to other corners of the globe (Sartori, 1970), Western concepts are invested with new meanings worthy of investigation.

Nation, sovereignty and legitimacy in Vietnam are particularly good examples of imported concepts, which have taken on elements of both a pre-existing world view and communist ideology, and continue to be redefined in response to post-Cold War developments. The evolution of democracy, for instance, into the global panacea of much Western development and political discourse (Welch and Kennedy-Pipe, 2004, p. 128), has not taken place in many Asian states. Some, such as Malaysia, Singapore and Cambodia, combine authoritarian and democratic elements. The jury is still out in Thailand since the 2006 military coup. The Philippines lacks political stability and Indonesia's fledgling democracy remains fragile, as military men start rattling their sabres once more (*Economist*, 2007, p. 58). Prospects for democratisation remain bleakest in Myanmar. How, then, do we understand the political system in Vietnam? Although the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, to give it its full name, remains a one-party state, the terms 'post-socialism', 'late socialism' and 'socialist market economy' have variously been used to describe its opening up to foreign trade, aid and investment over the past twenty years. There has been little political democratisation to match these economic changes, although signs of liberalisation, understood as 'an attempt to maintain the existing political configuration while accommodating new forces' (Gainsborough, 1996, p. 490) can be discerned. At the same time, the 'party-state' (Dixon, 2004, p. 15) should not be understood simply as a static, monolithic, authoritarian construct. This has never been the case, as the VCP in its various post-Second World War incarnations sought to co-opt different sectors of society

into supporting national reform and resistance alike. The authoritarianism of VCP initiatives such as agricultural collectivisation in the 1960s was also tempered by some scope to evade unpopular measures (Luong, 2003, p. 7).

As elsewhere, the boundaries between Vietnamese state and society, or the 'actors and institutions of governance on the one side, and the subjects of governance on the other' (Koh, 2006, p. 21), are not clear but blurred. Martin Gainsborough (2002) identifies government officials in their role as landowners, a rapidly growing business elite, a salaried middle class as well as the peasantry and rural workers as potential actors in 'late socialist Vietnam' (Taylor, 2003, p. 384). To this should be added foreign investors, international donors, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), the Vietnamese diaspora, the media, certain religious groups and the more muscular presence of the National Assembly within the government itself. These all have limited input at different levels, from the local, 'everyday politics' (Kerkvliet, 1995) of village affairs to the realm of high politics. A synthesis of the literature on recent Vietnamese state–society relations (Kerkvliet, 2003, p. 30) distinguishes the 'dominating state' interpretation, which locates decision making within the top party echelons, from 'mobilisational corporatism', which accords greater significance to the influence of mass organisations in managing people's relations with authority. A third, 'dialogic' approach places less emphasis on state capacity and points to the gaps in state control enabling considerable local autonomy and indirect, bottom-up influence. Examples include building regulations (Koh, 2006, p. 14), migration (Hardy, 2003b) and religious observance (Malarney, 2003). Each approach can illuminate different aspects of the sector under scrutiny; responses to corruption, for instance, have originated at both government and local levels. It can be concluded that the Vietnamese state is 'multifaceted, multisectioned and multilayered, featuring significant local power structures and inconsistencies' (Dixon, 2004, p. 16). Thus, popular perceptions of legitimacy vary not just over time (Narine, 2004, p. 428) but may also be 'patchy' due to experience of different state sectors.

On the international scene, Vietnam responded to the collapse of European communism and the end of Soviet aid flows by intensifying diplomatic relations with countries other than 'socialist brother nations'. Europe's systemic changes were not replicated domestically, however. Instead, Vietnam's 1992 constitution sought a clearer separation of government and party organs as a step towards greater transparency within the state apparatus. This was one expression of the VCP's recognition of its past failings and a contribution to strengthening the rule of law and cracking down on corruption, an ongoing process since 1987 (Gainsborough, 1996, p. 496). It is also important to note that the Vietnamese political system derives from an understanding of democracy based on mass participation. This is ensured through the important role of mass organisations – under the aegis of the Fatherland Front – in everything from policy implementation at local level to the selection of parliamentary candidates. Measures such as the grass-roots democracy decree also signalled a limited loosening of centralised party control.

This was passed in 1998 as a response to large-scale and sometimes violent demonstrations in Thai Binh province, triggered by corruption and conspicuous consumption on the part of local officials (Luong, 2003, p. 24). An overhaul of mass organisation leadership and more robust government scrutiny by the elected National Assembly provide further evidence of liberalisation (Gainsborough, 1996, p. 497). Nevertheless, tolerance of dissent is strictly limited. There are periodic clampdowns on the media (Marr, 2003, pp. 279–88), democratic activism is strictly forbidden and religious activity outside officially recognised organs is actively discouraged (Kerkvliet, 2003, p. 35). The VCP's pursuit of legitimacy is not based on the conception of popular sovereignty and democracy current in the West.

Basic political concepts (*Grundbegriffe*) such as liberty, democracy and the state are 'an inescapable, irreplaceable part of the political and social vocabulary ... always both controversial and contested' (Koselleck, cited in Richter, 2005, p. 10). In post-structuralist terms, such concepts are nodal, 'privileged points of partial fixation' (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001, p. 112) in a given discourse. Concepts must be contextualised in order to chart shifts in meaning over time and battles for 'conceptual hegemony'. This is particularly important when studying Asian countries, where the influence of Western missionaries, traders, diplomats and colonists vied with existing political systems. Western concepts were translated using approximate, sometimes anachronistic equivalents and sat uneasily with local lexicons of power (Walters, 2003). This was one reason for normative definitions of 'liberty' and 'democracy' in China, such as '“disorderly administration by many” and “government by the rabble”' (Richter, 2005, p. 12).¹ Western terminology rendered into Vietnamese was often the result of a double translation, first from French or English into Chinese or Japanese, and then again into modern Vietnamese (Kelley, 2003, p. 72; Marr, 2003, p. 257).

Both the legal and the moral sense of legitimacy are rendered in Vietnamese, suggesting that it is a feasible analytical term in this context. The word *hợp pháp* literally means to be in agreement with the law, whereas *chính đáng* conveys both a sense of justice and government. Sovereignty is rendered as *quyền tối cao độc lập*, literally meaning the highest form of independence. The concept of popular sovereignty also exists in Vietnam, expressed in terms of the Marxist-Leninist doctrine of the dictatorship of the proletariat (Zingerli, 2004, p. 55). There are two main words for nation, namely *quốc gia* and *đất nước*, often shortened to *nước*. The first is of Chinese derivation and conveys the idea of an extended family, whereas the second is composed of roots meaning land and water (Tran, 2003, p. 267). This renders the sense of elemental balance central to Vietnamese cosmology; the founding legend of the Vietnamese people tells that they are descended from a king of the sea and a mountain princess. In the same vein, a state geography and history textbook aimed at ten-year-olds describes Vietnam as being composed of both the territory and the skies above it (Nguyen *et al.*, 2006, p. 3). The same textbook also emphasises the importance of knowing Vietnam's

history in order to love its people and the fatherland (*tổ quốc*) even more. Finally, the term *dân tộc* is used to refer to ethnic groups, of which there are officially 54 in Vietnam. Composed of the words for people and lineage, the word is also used to refer to the Vietnamese people, or nation, as a whole. In Vietnam, as elsewhere, the nation thus has an important ethnic component.

The Nguyen dynasty's ignominious defeat by the French in the mid-nineteenth century led to its loss of legitimacy in the eyes of the Vietnamese people and the search for another leader to take on 'the mandate of heaven' (Mus, 1973; Vu, 2007, p. 186). Vietnamese intellectuals were in political ferment as they debated how to reinterpret Vietnamese tradition and identity to respond to the challenges of modernity. Some advocated reform, others chose to collaborate and still others prepared for revolution (Hue-Tam, 1992; Marr, 1981). The VCP has long derived its legitimacy from its socialist and nationalist leadership during three decades of struggle against France and the USA following the Second World War. Monuments erected to war heroes, and particularly those to 'patriots and revolutionaries', link their bravery to Vietnam's hard-won independence and to the VCP as leader of the revolution (Dixon, 2004, p. 17; Malarney, 2001). As such, they continue to be central to the Vietnamese government's legitimacy today: '[The Vietnam-American] war was the mother's milk, the school and the testing-ground of Vietnamese communism. It provides historical justification for the indispensable leadership of the Communist Party, endowing it with the "mandate of heaven"' (Pham, 2005).

The legacy of national resistance continues to be a substantial source of VCP legitimacy today, personified in Ho Chi Minh, the latest in a pantheon of Vietnamese heroes who fought against successive invaders (Malarney, 1997, p. 907). Not only is he officially revered as a communist hero, with his embalmed body visited by lines of schoolchildren and workers' collectives in the tradition of Lenin and Mao, but he is also venerated as a guardian spirit in some village temples. Although not officially sanctioned, this cult testifies to his popularity as a nationalist figure in the Vietnamese tradition of spirit worship. Furthermore, his leadership qualities are sincerely admired among the Vietnamese population as an example to be followed (Hue-Tam, 2001, p. 273). He is considered to embody a conception of virtue (*đạo đức*) and prestige (*uy tín*) which is central to legitimate leadership (Malarney, 1997, p. 900). Local officials are expected to impress not only party cells but also the local population with these qualities in order to enjoy respect and legitimacy in positions of authority. This trend is likely to continue as other credentials associated with war veterans fade with the generations and new forms of collective action (Luong, 2003, p. 24), distinct from mass organisations such as the Fatherland Front, become more vocal in Vietnam (Malarney, 1997, p. 917).

For theorists of nationalism, the Vietnamese case seems to provide some support for the ethno-symbolist claim that a pre-modern sense of ancestry and identity forms the basis of modern nationalism (Smith, 1986). Impressive archaeological

finds, including pediform axe heads, burial goods and large, richly decorated drums, offer ample evidence of a sophisticated Bronze Age culture in Northern Vietnam's Red River Delta. Linguists have found evidence of phonetically similar words meaning 'people' and by extension 'nation' among those living between the Yangtze and the Mekong rivers (Taylor, 1983, p. 3). Today, the Vietnamese nation is officially portrayed as having existed prior to Chinese conquest in the first millennium CE and emerged with its cultural identity intact. Developed by the Vietnamese government's Institute of History in the 1950s and 1960s (Pelley, 1995, p. 233), this is a conscious contradiction of French colonial theories characterising Vietnam as a withered offshoot of Chinese civilisation.

Today, the VCP uses the idea of national *longue durée* to bolster its own legitimacy as leader and guardian of the nation. For instance, a poster commemorating the party's 50-year jubilee adapts the familiar image of the Bronze Age drums by replacing their characteristic bird and boatmen motifs with factories and silos, setting a hammer and sickle squarely in the centre (Loofs-Wissowa, 1991, p. 48). The drums also figure prominently in museums, shrines to Ho Chi Minh and even the Vietnamese version of the 'Wheel of Fortune' television game show. This primordialist perspective is also shared by a number of Western scholars, a trend Tuong Vu (2007, p. 189) associates with the radicalisation of many academics in opposition to the Vietnam War. Grant Evans and Kevin Rowley (1984, p. 10) refer to 'that loose sense of national identity that could be termed "proto-nationalism"'. Alexander Woodside (1976, p. 30) uses the term 'national spirit' and Ken Post (1989, p. 86) asserts that by the thirteenth century the Vietnamese 'had become a unified people conscious of themselves as such and with a pantheon of heroes and heroines'. Citing territory, history, economy and language as unifying factors, Post (1989, p. 83) argues that the Vietnamese never forgot their independent existence before the millennium of Chinese rule (179 BCE–938 CE) and upheld customs such as tattooing, teeth blackening and betel nut chewing despite Chinese attempts to eradicate them. The fact that the Vietnamese took on many aspects of Chinese civilisation *after* independence, such as a legal code in 1042 and the Confucian examination system in 1075, is interpreted as a sign of level-headed recognition of progressive reforms rather than evidence of cultural assimilation. Current school history textbooks, the contents of which are state controlled, present much the same view (Nguyen *et al.*, 2006, p. 18).

The argument that nationalism is a product of modern circumstance has much to commend it in the Vietnamese case, however (Vu, 2007, p. 180). Liam Kelley (2003) has demonstrated how second millennium understandings of the Vietnamese realm as a 'domain of manifest civility' were premised on a completely different world view to that of 'nation-states'. This status was measured in literary output and records accessible only to the educated elite. It contrasts with early twentieth-century nationalism, which spread quickly to the masses, partly due to the popularisation of a Latin script that was relatively easy to master (Anderson, 1991, p. 126). The Red River civilisation only extended as far southwards as the

Mekong delta through conquest into Cham and Khmer kingdoms from the eleventh century onwards (Scupin, 1989, p. 488), leading some scholars to question constructions of the Vietnamese nation as only ever a *victim* of invasion (Vu, 2007, p. 179). Although much Vietnamese tradition is rooted in village life, it is questionable whether this can be equated with national loyalties. Indeed, the VCP itself was undecided as to the limits of the Vietnamese nation right up to the 1940s (Goscha, 1995). Nevertheless, the mobilising force of the nation has been exploited by Vietnamese leaders ever since and remains fundamental to the legitimacy of the VCP.

Calls for national solidarity were widespread during Vietnam's ongoing anti-colonial struggle, and Ho Chi Minh was adept at using appeals to national heroes to galvanise supporters (Marr, 1981, p. 401). William Duiker (1981, p. 5) reports Ho Chi Minh's comment that 'for him, the road to communism went through nationalism', illustrating how closely the two ideologies were linked in the Vietnamese case. Ho's communist-led *Viet Minh* coalition was only one of many nationalist groups and collaborators contesting the nature of the Vietnamese nation (Hue-Tam, 1992). Today, 'Uncle Ho's' carefully constructed cult of personality as a national father figure in Vietnam continues to emphasise his nationalist credentials as much as his communist ones. One of his most quoted phrases, emblazoned on a banner at the entrance to his mausoleum, reads, 'there is nothing more precious than independence and freedom'. Andrew Hardy (2003a, p. 177) has argued that 'the essence of DRV [pre-1975 Democratic Republic of Vietnam] administration, when it functioned correctly, was a grafting of family economic concerns onto patriotic sentiments of red nationalism'. It remains to be seen how the VCP reconciles its pursuit of legitimacy through nation building with macro-level regionalisation as a possible threat to sovereignty. Given Vietnam's history of resistance to foreign invasion and relatively recent independence, has Vietnamese nation building incorporated a regionalist ideology?

Reconciling Vietnam and ASEAN

Vietnam's membership of ASEAN and Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), as well as sub-regional initiatives surrounding the Mekong Basin (Dosch and Hensengerth, 2005) signals its readiness to engage in supranational dialogue, if not deep integration. The final section of this article looks at the impact of the regional, or supranational, level on Vietnamese nation-building discourse. The sixth VCP Congress in 1986 saw the introduction of an open door policy known as *đổi mới* – meaning renovation – bringing with it major changes in domestic policy such as the property regime and economic reforms. Despite these, the VCP continues to cling to its interpretation of 'one-party democracy'. It hopes that Vietnam's rapid growth, averaging 7.5 per cent between 2001 and 2005 (*Economist*, 2006), will cement the party's interpretation of national identity and legitimacy, rather than encourage calls for greater political pluralism. Anthropological evidence regarding the current revival of religious observance among

Vietnam's urban elites, for instance, has been interpreted both as an individual response to social change and part of 'state attempts to strengthen national identifications as a counterbalance to its policies of economic liberalisation' (Taylor, 2003, p. 383).

Taking place a few years before the end of European communism, the VCP Congress also heralded changes in Vietnam's foreign policy, and by extension in the official portrayal of national self-understanding. This was strongly linked to its continuing nation-building efforts. Leaders' references to unleashing the nation's 'inner strength' recalled traditions of national determination and resistance. They also attempted to counter disillusionment that decades of war did not bring an end to hardship and privations: 'Relative poverty more than 25 years after reunification has hurt the pride of the nation' (Dosch and Ta, 2004, p. 203). During the 1970s, Vietnam had been suspicious of whether ASEAN supported 'genuine neutrality' (Narine, 2002, p. 40), given the foreign military bases in Malaysia and the Philippines, as well as Thailand and the Philippines' support for the US in the Vietnam–American war. Throughout the 1980s, ASEAN and Vietnam were on opposite sides of a stand-off over Cambodia (then Kampuchea), where the murderous Khmer Rouge regime had been toppled by a Vietnamese invasion in 1978 and replaced by a client government. Vietnam presented this as a humanitarian intervention. ASEAN saw it as a move to assert Vietnamese dominance over communist Indochina, thereby directly threatening neighbouring Thailand. This conflict embodied ASEAN's original anti-communist *raison d'être*, when it was established in 1967 by Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Singapore and the Philippines.

Vietnamese attempts to draw closer to its ASEAN neighbours in the run-up to the 1978 invasion made it all the more shocking to the member states, which were united in condemnation but divided on an appropriate strategic response (Narine, 2002, p. 45). ASEAN's prestige as an international diplomatic partner was raised through diplomatic initiatives such as the International Conference on Kampuchea in 1981. However, internal tensions between Thailand and Indonesia in particular, coupled with the Great Powers' pursuit of divergent interests in the region, highlighted ASEAN's limited clout. Vietnam, which had declared its intention to withdraw its troops from Cambodia by 1990, accelerated the process as its Soviet ally became weaker and its own domestic reforms demanded external support, notably the resumption of suspended aid and normalisation of relations with China. Despite the diplomatic stalemate, economic cooperation with ASEAN improved in the 1980s and Vietnam openly indicated its desire eventually to become a member. Trade finally trumped tension as the Paris Peace Treaty was signed in 1991, determining Cambodia's future, and Vietnam's membership of ASEAN in 1995 signalled its readiness to pursue regionalism as part of its continuing nation-building project. It can thus be seen as part of a wider strategy in response to the collapse of communism, premised on the view that 'regional institutions can assist the state-building process' (Narine, 2004, p. 444).

By the year 2000, Vietnam had diplomatic ties with 167 countries, compared to 23 states sharing its ideological opposition to capitalism in 1989 (Dosch and Ta, 2004, p. 197). ASEAN's integration of its erstwhile enemy was a sign of changing times. The Vietnamese government was anxious to end its isolation as a political pariah and become an accepted partner for regional and international trade and investment. ASEAN's founding members, in turn, were keen to unite against a new threat in the post-Cold War era, that of regional insignificance. Sandwiched between the fast-developing economies of India and China, they wanted to assert themselves on a newly configured world stage and resist outsiders' attempts to impose their will on the region (Ramcharan, 2000). It was thus unthinkable that regional integration could be at the *expense* of strong state sovereignty. On the contrary, in member states' regionalist thinking, sovereignty was seen as a 'necessary *prerequisite*' (Narine, 2004, p. 444, emphasis in original).

ASEAN functions largely according to the principles of non-interference and decision making by consensus, known collectively as 'the ASEAN way'. The organisation's emphasis on respecting territorial sovereignty thus offers a means of reconciling regionalisation with nation building. Vietnam, long considered a destabilising factor in the region, has made conspicuous efforts to demonstrate both its regional commitment and ability to lead, hosting ASEAN summits, initiating the ASEAN culture week and organising other regional events such as the 2003 South-East Asian games, the 2004 Asia-Europe meeting (ASEM) and the 2006 APEC summit in Hanoi. This helps to strengthen perceptions of South-East Asia as a region, at least among elites, while establishing Vietnam as an international player (Sutherland, 2005b). Vietnam has carefully constructed its move from describing ASEAN as a hostile, capitalist, 'NATO-type' organisation to embracing membership. The VCP now claims that 'the present enemy of Vietnam is poverty and backwardness, and the friend of Vietnam is everybody who is willing to cooperate with and help us to push back poverty and backwardness' (Tran Quang Co, cited in Dosch and Ta, 2004, p. 200). ASEAN membership thus plays both to domestic legitimacy and external sovereignty; it defines a new enemy against which the VCP can lead the people while at the same time seeking to bolster international recognition.

Membership of ASEAN also signals a shift in focus from military to political and economic security. Although foreign policy still officially pursues 'socialist construction' in the creation of a 'socialist market economy', the emphasis is firmly on economic development. Neither has this rhetoric hindered substantial investment from donor countries and international organisations such as the World Bank. After all, 'the Vietnamese bureaucracy is well schooled in slogans' (Templer, 1998, p. 148) and its stated commitment to reform has been conducive to international cooperation. Despite important regional and ethnic disparities and a growing income differential (Luong, 2003, p. 16), Vietnam's success in reducing poverty over the last decade makes it attractive to aid agencies, which are keen to see their projects lead to measurable results. Yet Vietnam retains a vigorous 'self-belief'

(Gainsborough, 2002, p. 704) derived from its history of resistance, which makes it less vulnerable to international pressure than neighbouring states such as Laos and Cambodia. Foreign aid donors have also found this to their cost; the democratic agenda behind the World Bank's good governance programme has made little headway in Vietnam (Zingerli, 2004, p. 55). Instead, the Vietnamese government implements its explicit aim of 'absorbing external resources long and consistently [*sic*]' (VCP Central Committee, 1997, cited in Dinh, 2006, p. 9) while 'ensuring independence, self-control and socialist orientation' (Polit Bureau, 2001, cited in Dinh, 2006, p. 10). For the time being, the 'ASEAN way' poses no threat to that vision. On the contrary, it is calculated to strengthen international economic and political clout while maintaining ideological orthodoxy at home. Both internal and external sovereignty must be secure for Vietnam to countenance any form of cooperation, including regional integration.

Non-interference, respect for national sovereignty and decision making by inter-governmental consensus are core features of the 'ASEAN way' (Palmujoki, 2001, p. 8). ASEAN member states therefore dispute the following understanding of sovereignty:

[S]tate sovereignty has been eroded by the notion that the international community has obligations towards individual members of other states. Action on this idea of political legitimacy runs counter to the notion of the territorial integrity of states and the absolute sovereignty of states over their internal affairs (Moore, 2001, p. 46).

ASEAN member states are hostile towards attempts by the likes of the European Union to tie human rights conditionality to trade agreements, for instance. In some cases this is justified using arguments that human rights are not universal or that 'Asian values' prioritise second-generation rights – to work, for instance – over first-generation human rights such as freedom of speech, association and religion (Sutherland, 2006b). Member states see the ability to present a united front against international pressures in this way as a positive feature of the organisation, although the failings of fellow member states such as Myanmar can also be a source of embarrassment (Agence France Presse, 2006). When the ASEAN Culture Week took place in Vietnam in 2004, then prime minister Pham Van Khai expressed his support for ASEAN's fundamental principles and 'the flexible and wise combination of the interests of each nation and of the whole region' (*Vietnam News*, 2004). Indeed, the Vietnamese government first initiated the ASEAN Culture Week as a means of 'fostering a sense of regional identity' (ASEAN Secretariat, 2004). Deliberations on the first ASEAN charter also point in this direction (Eminent Persons Group, 2006), although declarations of principle can be an effective way of signalling unity without ceding sovereignty. It is unclear, for instance, whether Vietnam will accept the immediate implementation of some recommendations, most notably an ASEAN human rights commission (*International Herald Tribune*, 2007), with all the implications for domestic sover-

eignty this entails. This is one instance where Vietnam's regionalist rhetoric conflicts with the pressure of actual regionalisation.

A network of civil society groups has emerged within the ASEAN region, some with official links to the organisation itself. Calls for an ASEAN human rights body were channelled into a working group (Sutherland, 2006b), whereas the recently formed ASEAN civil society conference now presents its conclusions to the ASEAN heads of state (ASEAN Civil Society Conference, 2006). Their influence is minimal, given the officially intergovernmental nature and limited decision-making capacity of ASEAN itself, not to mention a weak regional tradition of policy making with 'social partners' (*Nation*, 2007). Tellingly, the proposed human rights mechanism is described by the Philippine foreign secretary, Alberto Romulo, as a means of achieving 'more credibility in the international community' (*International Herald Tribune*, 2007), thus emphasising its benefits for external sovereignty over its principal mission. Nevertheless, the proposal is evidence of a nascent system of regional oversight and the possibility of ASEAN institutions being established to underpin this. Vietnam is unlikely to be pressured on its poor human rights record or lack of democratisation by other member states, many of which display serious failings of their own. The strategic advantage of ASEAN membership in strengthening South-East Asia's presence on the world stage is not currently tempered by lost sovereignty or onerous international constraints, and so does not undermine Vietnam's nation-building discourse. The key consideration underpinning the future ASEAN charter remains unchanged: 'the best prospect for institutional development in the Asia-Pacific is still that states believe that regional institutions can assist the state-building process' (Narine, 2004, p. 444).

Despite lofty aspirations, enshrined in ASEAN's Hanoi (1999) and Vientiane (2004) Action Plans, the organisation remains resolutely intergovernmental. Its only institution is a permanent secretariat, although regular summits and ministerial meetings have gone some way towards creating an elite epistemic community, which includes the business community (Sutherland, 2006b). Moves towards creating an Asian Free Trade Area, however, have made slow progress, despite ambitions for a regional economic zone modelled on that of the European Union by 2015 (*Tuổi Trẻ Online*, 2006). At the same time, Vietnamese foreign policy continues to be officially articulated in nationalist and socialist terms, and linked to principles of Ho Chi Minh's thought, which has been elevated to a status similarly high to Marxist-Leninist doctrine in Vietnam. One of the VCP's central, explicit aims is to develop the economy to narrow the gap with regional neighbours. The new focus on 'economic emulation' over ideological distinctions between friend and enemy, however, is couched in a firm and oft-repeated commitment to upholding 'national sovereignty, territorial integrity, national unification' (Dinh, 2006, p. 1). This demonstrates that the VCP's regionalism is premised on its potential to rescue or 'buttress' (Milward, 1994, p. 3) the nation-state without even symbolically 'pooling' sovereignty at the ASEAN level. The

regionalist element in Vietnam's nation-building discourse can well afford to be positive, as it currently offers the 'win-win' prospect of enhancing both domestic legitimacy and external sovereignty.

Conclusion

In the spirit of Geertz's critique outlined above, it is dangerous to assume that political developments in Asia will necessarily lead to Western-style liberal democracy (Gainsborough, 2002, p. 696). The 2006 coup in Thailand, until recently considered a standard-bearer of South-East Asian democracy, is a case in point. The 1990s rhetoric of prominent leaders such as Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew and Malaysia's Mahathir Mohamad is another (Mahathir and Ishihara, 1995; Sutherland, 2006b). Nor can social scientists measure popular legitimacy in South-East Asia through the blunt instrument of the ballot box, and more sophisticated methods are being developed and tested (White, 2005). Official nation building in Vietnam, however, is nevertheless based on the pursuit of popular legitimacy and state sovereignty. The latter premise might seem increasingly untenable in the context of globalisation. Yet the concept of sovereignty is still useful in linking the pursuit of 'nation-state' legitimacy with the wider regional context to which it must adapt.

Recent studies of the Vietnamese state highlight great variations in its degree of penetration and control over different areas of the political system (Dixon, 2004, p. 16). The present political climate is also a mixture of tolerance and periodic clampdowns. The case of Vietnamese nation building and its relationship to ASEAN has shown that regionalism can be reconciled with a nation-building project by subordinating it to an existing political ideology. Regionalism, a specific ideological interpretation of the macro-level regionalisation process, can be used to bolster national legitimacy and external sovereignty: 'ASEAN is characteristically an intergovernmental organization. Its starting point is to support Southeast Asian nation-building' (Palmujoki, 2001, p. 14). Future research might use the proposed conceptual framework to compare regionalist ideologies in cases of nation building across Europe, Africa and the Americas as well as across time, including colonial and post-colonial approaches to national 'self-presentations' (Hansen and Stepputat, 2006, p. 297).

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Note

¹ This interpretation is also similar to dominant, elite understandings of democracy from classical Greece to nineteenth-century England (Arblaster, 2002, p. 7).

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