Thai stakeholders' perceptions of Vietnam and Thai-Vietnamese relations

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Abstract
Vietnam is a rising star, attracting growing attention from the international community. Having registered steady economic growth rates during the past decade, it now assumes increasing regional and international roles. Even before Vietnam became a WTO member in January 2007, it had become a favorite site for foreign investment and launched into export-led development. Thailand is now taking great interest in Vietnam. This preliminary study of Thai stakeholders’ perceptions of Vietnam indicates that, while there is some concern over competition from this rising neighboring country in trade, investment, and even in cultural activities such as sports, the Thai generally have a highly positive attitude. Despite the history of antagonism in the past, the relationship today is perceived as mature, trouble-free, and cordial. This naturally bodes well for the future of Thai-Vietnamese relations.

Stakeholders’ perceptions and Thai-Vietnamese relations
Vietnam may now be said to be a rising star. It is attracting growing attention from the international community. In Southeast Asia it is second only to Indonesia in terms of population size, and given its other potentials it is destined to become a main pillar within ASEAN.

Vietnam has registered steady economic growth rates during the past decade. It has also assumed increasing regional and international roles. Even before Vietnam became a World Trade Organization member in January 2007, it had already been a favorite site in this region for foreign direct investment and had been quite successful in its export-led development efforts.

The Thai people are now taking great interest in Vietnam. This can be judged from the continuing press reports, including TV programs, on this neighboring country. It is not surprising that the interest represents some concern about Vietnam being a major competitor in trade and the drive for foreign investment capital, as well as in sports.

There might be some strong reasons for concern about this competition. Power rivalry characterized Thai-Vietnamese relations in the pre-colonial period. Moreover, less than twenty years ago the relationship between the two countries still remained antagonistic as a result of Cold War regional polarization and the conflict in Cambodia.

However, Thai-Vietnamese relations may now be said to be healthier than at any other time in recent history. Not only is the relationship virtually trouble-free but the two countries have also engaged in numerous collaborative enterprises at both bilateral and multilateral levels. Moreover, on the people-to-people front, exchanges of various types, from tourism to sports tournaments, have been growing rapidly. Indeed, some even believe that Thailand and Vietnam will in the future represent the most important pillars of ASEAN.

What is the real state of Thai-Vietnamese relations? How are we to assess it? Naturally, we cannot judge this from only the media or official statements. There are many other “stakeholders” ranging from tour operators to policy-makers. Not all of them directly take part in making Thai policy towards Vietnam, but they have a stake of one type or another in the relationship. Their views may thus not only be taken as a barometer of the real “health” of this relationship but also have some impact on official policy. Hence, the crucial question that will guide this enquiry is: What are the perceptions of the Thai people, especially those who could be regarded as the stakeholders in Thai-Vietnamese relations, of Vietnam and the current state of Thai-Vietnamese relations?

Perceptions are not steady. They are significantly subject to change with changing situations, internal as well as external. However, at any particular time, perceptions are most relevant to foreign policy analysis. Policy analysts are normally interested in the perceptions of policy-makers—those public officials, elected or

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appointed, who assume direct responsibility for foreign policy-making. But, as has been indicated, there exist many other stakeholders, whose views and interests could influence official policy. It is thus important that we take into account the perceptions of these diverse groups of Thai people.

Who are the stakeholders? In this study attention is directed to the following three groups of people: 1. officials, including several government agencies directly involved in Thai-Vietnamese relations such as the Ministries of Foreign Affairs, the Interior, Commerce, and the National Security Council; the Board of Investment, and the Tourism Authority of Thailand, among others; 2. the media and other analysts, including academics; and 3. the private sector, including Thai businesses in the relevant provincial areas.

What are the main contents of Thai stakeholders’ perceptions? This study is deliberately unstructured in its orientation. That is, my intention is to uncover, as broadly as possible, the views and attitudes of Thai stakeholders without a specific framework. The survey covers perceptions of: the current status and potential of Vietnam; the present state of Thai-Vietnamese relations; Thai-Vietnamese relations in multilateral frameworks; prospects for economic and cultural cooperation; opportunities for Thai business in Vietnam; areas of bilateral cooperation, actual and potential; and the future of Thai-Vietnamese relations.

Thai-Vietnamese relations have a long history. The relationship will also further evolve in the same or different direction. Covering only a small fragment of this evolving relationship—that is, its current state—this survey of Thai stakeholders’ perceptions of Vietnam and Thai-Vietnamese relations becomes meaningful only if it is placed in a proper perspective: how Thai-Vietnamese relations have evolved to this point, and how the present state of affairs is perceived by Thai stakeholders. I thus begin with a synoptic view of Thai-Vietnamese relations and a current profile of Vietnam.

Thai-Vietnamese relations in perspective

Vietnam is one of Thailand’s close neighbors. The two countries do not share land borders, nor do they have any strong
cultural ties—Thailand is Theravada Buddhist, and Vietnam is Confucian, in outlook. However, their relationship, which goes back at least to the Ayutthaya period, has been important to both of them.

Both amity and antagonism have characterized this relationship. From the mid seventeenth to the first half of the nineteenth centuries, in particular, Siam and Vietnam engaged in power competition, especially over Cambodia.\(^2\) Even though French colonialism effectively put an end to this rivalry, Thai-Vietnamese relations once again fell into enmity under the Cold War influence.\(^3\) It is indeed during this time that the relationship was not only distant but also largely antagonistic.

The communist movement in Vietnam assumed a leadership role in the country’s struggle for independence.\(^4\) The concern about communist expansionism in Asia following the victory of the Chinese Communist Party and the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in October 1949 primarily prompted the United States to support France in its war with the Viet-Minh.\(^5\) Moreover, in an attempt to build a broad anti-communist coalition, the United States mobilized Thai support for French-controlled southern Vietnam that was at that time under the Bao Dai puppet regime.\(^6\) In February 1950 the Thai government then led by Field Marshall Plaek Phibunsongkhram responded to this US initiative by extending recognition to the Bao Dai regime.\(^7\) This was a watershed in Thai foreign policy—a clear signal that Thailand was now in the anti-communist camp—that was particularly relevant to its relations with Vietnam.

With the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu in 1954, and following the partition of Vietnam in accordance with the Geneva Accords of the same year, the United States was determined to keep the southern part of the country as a bulwark against communism. All efforts were thus made, including direct military intervention from the latter half of the 1960s onwards, to attain this goal; and Thailand, among other regional states, was closely involved in many aspects of US activity in Indochina during this period.

In September 1954 Thailand joined the Manila Pact and the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization that was set up within the framework of this military alliance. Though it was not part of this
alliance, Southern Vietnam, which in October 1955 became the Republic of Vietnam, was within its protective scope. Moreover, from the late 1950s, Thailand was active in its support for the anti-communist factions in Laos. When the conflict in Indochina escalated into an almost full-scale war, Thailand supported the US war effort. Beginning in 1967, a number of Thai troops were sent to fight the communists in Vietnam, and others engaged in secret missions in Laos and Cambodia. The Thai government also provided the US with bases and other facilities, including airbases for B-52 bombers, for its military operations in Indochina.

The Vietnam War had the important effect of widening the wound in Thai-Vietnamese relationship that had already suffered from issues such as the Vietnamese refugees in Thailand. Hence, when the war was coming to an end, Thailand had to make important policy adjustments to a new regional environment that was taking shape, especially the prospect of co-existing with a communist Indochina.

Though not directly related to the unfolding events in Indochina, the internal political change in Thailand following the uprising by students and people in October 1973 greatly facilitated these adjustments. The civilian governments, especially the elected ones during 1975–6 that came to power after the demise of the military regime, were able to mend the shattered fence with Vietnam. The government’s decision to terminate the US airbases and other military facilities, together with the presence of US troops, on Thai territory signaled a significant change in Thai policy that contributed much to the lessening of post-Vietnam War tension in Thai-Vietnamese relations. The establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries in August 1976 may indeed be regarded as the success of Thai policy adjustments to the new regional environment.

The success can also be attributed to new developments on the regional as well as international scene. The most important development was the growing Sino-Vietnamese tension that was closely associated with the Sino-Soviet rift. The escalation of hostilities in Vietnam had increased the country’s military dependence on the Soviet Union. The result was a closer relationship between Vietnam and the Soviet Union. Beijing was
understandably unhappy with this development, and after the end of the Vietnam War China suspended all its assistance to Vietnam. The tension deepened with the resurgence of conflict between Vietnam and Cambodia in the aftermath of the Vietnam War.\(^1\) Though this complicated situation was to come to a head in the late 1970s with Vietnam’s use of force to topple the Pol Pot regime in Cambodia, the post-Vietnam War conflict among the communist states provided Thailand with a unique opportunity to adjust its foreign policy orientation to become more flexible. Most significantly, instead of being confronted with a new communist threat following the communist victory in Indochina, Thailand was able to forge new relationships that crucially guaranteed its security.

First, the new elected government of M.R. Kukrit Pramoj successfully normalized Thailand’s relations with the People’s Republic of China in July 1975. With China already reoriented towards the West as a result of the increasingly threatening posture of the Soviet Union, relations with this communist power acted as a major counter-balance to Vietnam that had just emerged victorious from the Indochina War.

Secondly, in face of growing tensions with both China and Cambodia, its former allies, Hanoi sought friendly relations with its non-communist neighbors rather than further complicate this conflict situation. The success of the Seni Pramoj government, which succeeded the Kukrit Pramoj leadership in 1976, in establishing Thailand’s diplomatic relations with Vietnam must have been in large measure related to this new regional reality. The year 1978 marked a high point in Thailand’s relationship with the communist states. Both China and Vietnam sought Thai friendship as a result of their rising mutual tension.

Finally, with such realignments among the communist states, the Communist Party of Thailand, which had been leaning to the Chinese Communist Party, was in total disarray. That meant a major internal security threat to Thailand was almost totally neutralized. Beijing was pursuing a dual track relationship, that is, providing only moral support for the fraternal party in Thailand, while conducting state-to-state relations with the government in Bangkok. Moreover, following the Sino-Vietnamese split, the Communist Party of Thailand lost its crucial back-up. Hanoi
would no longer provide refuge and training for the Beijing-oriented Thai communists. Hence, when Vietnam’s prime minister, Pham Van Dong, gave the assurance to his Thai counterpart, General Kriangsak Chomanand, during his visit to Bangkok in 1978 that Vietnam would not support the Communist Party of Thailand, he did not in actual fact concede anything to Thailand. In any event, the regional situation seemed to have become, for the first time after the end of the Vietnam War, favorable to Thailand. It seemed that for the time being Thailand and Vietnam were really coming to terms with each other.

However, this favorable situation was short-lived. In January 1979, Vietnam succeeded in replacing, by force, the Pol Pot-led government in Phnom Penh with a pro-Hanoi People’s Republic of Kampuchea. The Thai government regarded this new situation as a serious threat to Thai security. For a whole decade from then on Thai-Vietnamese relations were characterized by diplomatic as well as border tensions. Though diplomatic relations were still in place, there was hardly any direct bilateral dialogue. Thailand principally relied on ASEAN’s diplomacy, as well as on Chinese military and political influence, to put pressure on Vietnam.¹¹

Tensions and conflict dragged on until the end of the 1980s. Signs of change, especially on Vietnam’s part, had nevertheless begun to appear well before that. Hanoi had persisted, since 1979, in demanding international recognition of the People’s Republic of Kampuchea. It was not until after 1985 that the Vietnamese position became more flexible. By that time the full impact of both internal and external pressures on Vietnam had begun to be felt. The economic difficulties that Vietnam had been experiencing since the reunification of the country, the loss of Soviet support resulting from the reorientation of the USSR’s foreign policy during the Gorbachev period, and the increasing human and other costs in Cambodia exerted a growing pressure on the Vietnamese leadership to change the course of its policy. The Sixth Party Congress in December 1986 was a watershed in both internal and external policies of Vietnam. The congress’s adoption of “doi moi” (renovation) had crucial implications for its domestic politics as well as foreign policy.

The first important sign of change was the initiation of
informal talks between Sihanouk, leader of the Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea, and Hun Sen, prime minister and foreign minister of the People’s Republic of Kampuchea. The talks started in 1987 and were resumed several times over the next two years. Even though the talks failed to produce any concrete result leading directly to the settlement of the conflict, they did instigate changes, such as the change in the regime in Phnom Penh. In some respects, this dialogue may be said to have paved the way for subsequent talks that finally contributed to the comprehensive settlement of the conflict in October 1991. These included the talks at the Jakarta Informal Meeting in July 1988 (and again in February 1989) between the Cambodian factions and Vietnam, which may be regarded as a prelude to the more formal negotiation in Paris during July–August 1989. Meanwhile, a significant shift in Thai policy, as embodied in the call by prime minister General Chatichai Choonhavan for the transformation of battlefields into a marketplaces, signaled a new and more reconciliatory posture of Thailand towards Vietnam.

The intensification of diplomatic efforts to solve the Cambodian conflict towards the end of the 1980s coincided with dramatic changes on the international scene. In particular, the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe, the developing Sino-Soviet reconciliation, and the growing impatience of the major powers with the prolongation of the Vietnam-Cambodia conflict increasingly put pressure on the two parties to accept peace.

The withdrawal of Vietnamese troops from Cambodia in September 1989 signaled the most crucial move towards that direction. The United Nations Security Council’s adoption in August 1990 of a framework document for a comprehensive political settlement of the conflict served as an ultimatum to the parties to the conflict that this was their last chance for a negotiated peace. The plan was accepted by Vietnam and all the Cambodian factions, and thus became the basis for the Paris Agreement on the Comprehensive Political Settlement of the Cambodia Conflict that was signed on 23 October 1991 by the four Cambodian factions and nineteen other countries. With this peace agreement, not only was Cambodia to experience a “rebirth” after UN-controlled elections in 1993, but also “normal” relations between Thailand
and Vietnam were soon under way.

Thai-Vietnamese relations progressed rapidly after the settlement of the Cambodian conflict. Thailand enthusiastically supported Vietnam’s membership of ASEAN, which Vietnam formally joined in 1995. Moreover, with the normalization of Vietnam’s relations with the interested powers, most significantly China (in 1991) and the United States (in 1995), the Southeast Asian region as well as Thai-Vietnamese relations entered a new era of close cooperation. Mutual suspicion and mistrust that used to dominate Thai-Vietnamese relationship drastically declined.

Evidently, the change in the regional and international situation was highly favorable to a new relationship between Thailand and Vietnam. Moreover, internal developments in the two countries—Vietnam’s reforms and Thailand’s export-led growth—also greatly contributed to this positive turn in Thai-Vietnamese relations. 15 Most significantly, there was a crucial shift in the attitude of the leaderships of both countries. Beginning with premier Chatichai Choonhavan’s proposal to transform battlefields into marketplaces, reform-minded leaders in Hanoi became more open especially to neighboring countries. Such an attitude was clearly reflected in prime minister Do Muoi’s declaration of Vietnam’s aspiration to join ASEAN: “We wish to join ASEAN very much. Joining ASEAN would be helpful. We need more friends to build our country.” 16

The new era of the bilateral relationship was symbolically inaugurated by the exchange of visits between prime minister Vo Van Kiet of Vietnam and prime minister Anand Panyarachun. The Vietnamese premier visited Thailand in October 1991 and his Thai counterpart returned the visit in January the following year. Since then the relationship has made steady progress. Together with success in solving long-standing problems between the two countries, such as those relating to fisheries and overlapping territorial waters and Viet Kieu or overseas Vietnamese in Thailand, the two countries have entered into numerous agreements (more than twenty have been concluded), including an agreement on visa exemptions that reflects the growing goodwill and friendship between the Thai and Vietnamese peoples. 17
Vietnam today: political and economic developments

Vietnam is a one-party state run on the Marxist-Leninist line of democratic centralism. However, both the Vietnam Communist Party (VCP) and the Vietnamese government have undergone significant changes since the party was first in power in 1945. The important changes following the formal reunification of the country at the fourth party congress July in 1976 were the change of the party’s name (from Vietnam Workers Party to VCP) and the enlargement of the party itself. The Central Committee was expanded from 77 to 133 members; the Politburo grew from eleven to seventeen members; and the Secretariat increased from seven to nine members. The party membership also doubled from 760,000 in 1966 to 1,553,500 in 1976, representing 3.1 percent of the total population. A decade later party membership was close to two million.

After a further expansion of the Central Committee to 173 members at the sixth party congress in 1986, the party’s organizational profile has been roughly steady. The membership of the Central Committee has averaged between 160 and 170: the tenth party congress in April 2006 elected 160 members to the Central Committee. Likewise, the membership of the Politburo has been steady at fourteen to fifteen, while that of the Secretariat has ranged from eight to nine. The present memberships of the Politburo and the Secretariat, elected at the tenth party congress, are fourteen and eight, respectively.

Another important development since 1986 is that with the death of party general secretary Le Duan in that year (he had been in this position since 1960), the leadership change seems to have also been regularized. At the sixth party congress in 1986, Nguyen Van Linh was named the party general secretary. At the next congress in 1991 he was succeeded by Do Muoi, who was in turn succeeded by Le Kha Phieu at the eighth party congress in 1997. Only Nong Duc Manh, who succeeded Le Kha Phieu at the ninth party congress in 2001, was re-elected as the party general secretary at the tenth party congress in 2006.

Though the VCP has always assumed a central role in Vietnam’s politics and society—the role formally reaffirmed by the 1992 constitution—the executive agencies created by the
constitution, namely the offices of the president and the prime minister, have become increasing important. Functioning as the head of state as well as the nominal commander of the armed forces and chairman of the Council on National Defense and Security, the president (currently Nguyen Minh Triet, who was elected to the office by the National Assembly in June 2006) has been more visible, especially when formally representing Vietnam abroad. The office of prime minister (presently occupied by Nguyen Tan Dung, who was appointed to the office by the president in June 2006) has become even more important. With the task of managing public affairs of a modern state becoming increasingly complicated, this executive function requires a person who is both younger and more technically competent than his or her predecessors. Now engaging in more wide ranging executive functions, the prime minister of Vietnam has become more visible in both Vietnamese politics and internationally.

The National Assembly, which serves as the highest representative body of the people and is mandated to oversee all government functions, has also become more important. Now composed of 498 members, who are elected to a five-year term, the National Assembly is no longer regarded as little more than a rubber stamp, but has become increasingly more vocal and assertive in exercising its legislative authority and in overseeing government functions. Currently Dr. Nguyen Phu Trong is serving as the chairman of the National Assembly.

Whether Vietnamese politics is making any progress in a more democratic direction is a moot point, though much change has occurred. At least the Vietnamese leadership has become ideologically more flexible, and that flexibility has been responsible for important changes in recent times. Perhaps the most important change during this time is the adoption of a reform program (doi moi or renovation) by the sixth party congress in December 1986. This change, of course, was necessitated by the crisis in the socialist development that Vietnam had embarked upon in the late 1970s. However, though doi moi might not have brought about much change in terms of political openness, it has at least brought a far better quality of life to a large number of people in Vietnam.

Vietnam has experienced an average GDP growth of about 7
percent during the past decade.\textsuperscript{23} The GDP growth was 8.4 percent in 2005, the second highest growth in Asia, trailing only China, and the government's figure on GDP growth in 2006 was 8.1 percent. The target GDP growth rate for 2007 set by the government is 8.5 percent. Vietnam's purchasing power parity (PPP) in 2006 was US$ 280.2 billion, and its per capita PPP of the same year was US$ 3,300. The 2003 estimates of the sector composition of Vietnam's production structure were as follows: agriculture 21.8 percent, industry 39.7 percent, and services 38.5 percent.

Vietnam is now the world's largest exporter of robusta coffee, cashew nuts, and pepper, and the second largest exporter of rice. Its other key commodities include tea, rubber, and fishery products. The share of agriculture in Vietnam's economic output has nevertheless declined, falling from 42 percent of GDP in 1989 to 26 percent in 1999. On the other hand, the shares of industry and services have grown substantially. Major branches of industry are mining (especially coal), cement, phosphate, steel, electronics and parts, and a number of labor-intensive industries. While labor-intensive manufactured goods such as garments and wood products have in recent years increased their shares of exports, Vietnam's most important export is crude oil, amounting to US$ 5.5 billion in 2005.\textsuperscript{24} Other important exports include textiles and garments, footwear, and seafood. Wood products and electronic components are also assuming growing importance.

Foreign direct investment (FDI) has contributed much to invigorating the industrial landscape in Vietnam. By October 2005, there had been 5,774 FDI projects with total capital of US$ 49,102 million (though only about half of this amount has already been expended).\textsuperscript{25} Vietnam's export strategy for 2006–10 has designated the following eight products as the main components in its exports: wood products, electronics and electrical appliances, plastics, handicrafts, vegetables and fruits, cashew nuts, ship building, and agricultural machinery and farm equipment.

Throughout the 1990s Vietnam's exports expanded substantially, growing in some years by as much as 20 to 30 percent. In 1999, exports accounted for 40 percent of GDP. Major export markets are the United States (US$ 5.3 billion in 2004),
Japan (US$ 3.5 billion), and China (US$ 2.3 billion). Thailand is not among the ten largest export markets of Vietnam. Despite some success in import control, Vietnam has continued to experience trade deficits. This is due largely to the need to import capital goods, most notably machinery and equipment, petroleum products, and iron. These three items have accounted for about one-third of its total imports. Moreover, under ASEAN’s Common Effective Preferential Tariff Scheme, Vietnam has gradually reduced its tariffs on imports from other members of the association to not more than 5 percent since early 2006.

Vietnam’s balance-of-payments has nevertheless remained stable in recent years. In addition to increasingly stronger trade performance, the country has significantly benefited from official development assistance and remittances from Viet Kieu (overseas Vietnamese). Hence, though Vietnam’s per capita GDP is still about one-fifth of that of Thailand, with remittances from Viet Kieu as a supplementary source of revenues, the Vietnamese people have a relatively high purchasing power. Moreover, though Vietnam’s total external debt still stands at US$ 19.3 billion in 2007, equivalent to about 27 percent of GDP, its overall financial status remains healthy.

Vietnam had succeeded in reducing the percentage of its people living in abject poverty (less than US$ 1 a day) from 51 percent in 1990 to 8 percent in 2006. The percentage of the population living in abject poverty is now smaller than that of China, India, and the Philippines.

How do Vietnam and Thai-Vietnamese relations stand in the perceptions of Thai stakeholders?

The above profiles of both Thai-Vietnamese relations and the political and economic status of Vietnam today might or might not coincide with the perceptions of Thai stakeholders (already identified above for the purpose of this study). Therefore, our most crucial task remains: how do Vietnam and Thai-Vietnamese relations now stand in the perceptions of these people?

The inquiry into this research question is qualitative in nature: that is, it does not rely on any formal statistical methods or analysis.
Two very simple methods have been used in gaining information on Thai stakeholders' perceptions: documentary study and field research, interviews and brainstorming discussions.

Relevant documents selected for this study include press reports, academic analyses, as well as published opinions and comments by interested people and organizations. The most readily available sources of Thai stakeholders' perceptions of Vietnam today are the media. This study has thus drawn heavily on the media's coverage of this country.

However, the media are not only an important source of information but also significant as stakeholders. The media thus assume a dual role in this study, as a crucial source of information on the one hand, and as stakeholders in Thai-Vietnamese relations, on the other.

This limited documentary research has been supplemented by interviews and brainstorming discussions with a number of individuals in the public and private sectors, as well as academia. As has been indicated, this study is unstructured: the purpose is to identify, within the limited range of empirical data from these sources, all possible patterns of Thai stakeholders' perceptions of Vietnam and Thai-Vietnamese relations. Even with this limited range of information, the findings represent highly relevant patterns of such perceptions. These patterns will be made clearer in the next section.

The current interest of most Thai stakeholders, as represented in published opinions and comments and in the interviews and brainstorming sessions, is focused on Vietnam's status and potential, now as well as in the future. The question "Is Vietnam surpassing Thailand?" is now top-of-mind, and it is not surprising that stakeholders' perceptions are strikingly similar.

The media's perceptions: the little dragon that is becoming a tiger

This study of the Thai media's perceptions relies heavily on the reports, comments, and analyses contained in three Thai newspapers, Krungthep Thurakit, Khomchatluek, and Phujatkan. The first two dailies belong to the Nation Multimedia Group, and the third to the Manager Group. Of all print media in Thailand, these three papers most regularly carry reports, comments, and
analyses on Vietnam (and other Indochinese countries). *Phujatkan*, in particular, has been doing this on a daily basis during the past several years.  

A number of reports, comments, and analyses that have appeared in the three newspapers during the two years 2005–7 have been selected to represent the Thai media’s perceptions of present-day Vietnam.  

It is interesting to note that Vietnam has been portrayed positively in these three daily papers. Such a portrayal may indicate the Thai people’s increasingly positive perceptions and understanding of this neighboring country. Indeed, given the media’s role as an influential shaper of public opinion in Thailand, this could at least be expected to have a crucial impact on the perceptions of the Thai people in general.

**Success of reforms**

The Thai press has been particularly impressed with Vietnam’s success in economic reform. *Krungthep Thurakit*‘s recent in-depth report states that the country has been totally transformed during the past two decades.  

According to the report, which quoted Foreign Minister Nguyen Dy Nien, Vietnam twenty years ago still suffered from food shortage. It had to rely particularly on imports of rice, but it has now become a major rice-exporting country. It was able to achieve food sufficiency only two years after the initiation of its economic reform (in December 1986), and four years later it became the world’s second largest exporter of rice (after Thailand). In 2005, it exported more than 4.5 tons of rice.  

Vietnam has also experienced important developments in many other areas, including better living standards, rapid expansion of infrastructure, and industrial development.  

According to the Thai press, the country has indeed achieved miraculous success in its economic reform, and now everybody believes that it has a great potential.

**Impressive economic growth**

As a result of its successful economic reform, Vietnam has experienced impressive growth. The Thai media are especially impressed with its average 7-8 percent growth rate. Such a growth
rate confirms that the country is becoming a new “rising tiger.”  

With such an impressive economic performance, the Thai media show their enthusiasm for Vietnam’s determination to leave the developing world group by 2010 and to become an industrializing country in 2020. Moreover, it is pointed out in the Thai press that the people’s living standards have significantly improved. They generally have money to spend, and the country has gained substantial credit from its success in concretely reducing the gaps among the different strata of society.

**Improving and expanding infrastructure**

Rapid economic growth has necessitated the improvement and expansion of infrastructure. Important infrastructure development projects that have been reported in the Thai press include the construction of a new international airport in Long Thanh Township, Dong Nai Province (not very far away from Ho Chi Minh City), the expansion of Ho Chi Minh City international airport (Ton Son Nhat International Airport), the construction of a deep-sea port, and the development of new economic highways. Other projects are already under construction, including the large oil refinery and gas-separation plant in Dung Quat, Quang Ngai Province, and power plants. Moreover, large industrial projects, such as ship-building, have also attracted the Thai media’s attention.

**Political stability**

Another important impression of the Thai media is that, given the improvement in their living standards, the Vietnamese people are now satisfied with the present situation in their country. The people generally have a good attitude towards the Communist Party of Vietnam that has brought growing economic prosperity to the country. This is a major condition for its present political stability. The general impression, as reflected in the Thai press, is therefore that Vietnam’s economic success owes much to its relative political stability. In the absence of serious challenges to its authority, the Communist Party of Vietnam has been able to formulate and enforce policies in a timely manner.
Investment attractiveness

Vietnam has attracted large inflows of foreign capital. The Thai press reported in April 2007, for example, that, according to the Ministry of Planning and Investment, forty large investment projects with a total value of US$ 35 billions were waiting to be approved by the Vietnamese government. Though only one-third of these projects would be approved, it is evident that Vietnam's target of attracting US$ 12 billion investment capital could be easily met. Numerous incentive schemes, improving infrastructure, as well as the favorable political situation have accounted for its growing investment attractiveness.

Strong leadership and hardworking people

What is particularly remarkable about the Thai media's coverage of present-day Vietnam is their admiration for both its political leadership and people. It is an admiration for both the Party and the people who have been portrayed as the real force behind Vietnam's present success.

The Vietnamese people are generally perceived as hard working and strongly determined to push their country ahead. As a Thai journalist has aptly observed, “The Vietnamese people regard economic development as a kind of war effort. We can see that Vietnam's development strategy is like a guerilla war program consisting of both short-term and long-term targets, and attacks as well as retreats, depending upon the prevailing situation. In any case, the Vietnamese people are most persevering [to win this war]."

The Vietnamese political leadership, on its part, is perceived as progressive as well as efficient. It was reported that prime minister Nguyen Tan Dung had been selected by Britain's World Business as one of the “Top 20 Asian Progressives.” The Thai people were told, moreover, that, given his far-sightedness, determination, and achievements in transforming the command economy of Vietnam into a market-led one, the 57-year old prime minister is recognized as Vietnam's first leader to be on a par with other leading political figures in this region.

Other Vietnamese leaders are perceived likewise. In particular, the new cabinet that was appointed by the National Assembly in August 2007 is characterized by the Thai press as “high-powered
new blood.” Half of its twenty-two members are new faces, including two new young-blood deputy prime ministers. The Thai people have also learned from this report that many of these new faces are very well educated with doctoral degrees from either local or foreign institutions.

Another aspect of Vietnam’s present leadership that has highly impressed the Thai press is their sincerity and modesty. The Vietnamese leaders, from cabinet ministers to high-ranking officials, are sincere about the formidable problems facing them and are modestly open about their own weaknesses and limitations. As reported in the Thai press, these people admit that public officials are still inefficient. Many among them have firmly adhered to an outdated bureaucratic style, and the problem of corruption is still rampant. It is quite amazing, according to the Thai media, that these were words coming from high-ranking public officials, not from some obscure quarters of the country.

**Increasing international stature**

The Thai media have been closely following Vietnam’s growing role in international affairs. The country formally joined ASEAN in 1995, APEC in 1998, and the WTO member in January 2007. Moreover, during the past decade, it has expanded its relations with the major powers such as the United States, China, the European Union, Japan, and South Korea.

Specific importance has been given by the Thai press to Vietnam’s relations with the United States. The visit of President Nguyen Minh Triet to the United States in June 2007, the first visit by a Vietnamese head of state to this country since the end of the Vietnam War thirty-two years earlier, was highlighted as ushering in a new era in the relationship between two former enemies. In particular, the Thai press emphasized that the visit took place at a time when their bilateral relationship was being elevated to a new level following Vietnam’s accession to the WTO earlier that year.

Indeed, with a significant improvement of its image, Vietnam has now been widely regarded as a trusted friend by the international community. In hosting both ASEM and APEC meetings in 2006, the country greatly boosted its international role
and its image. In ASEAN, it has been recognized as an important force. With already strong connections with the new members (Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar), it has gained both recognition and respect of the old members, namely, Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand. Moreover, given its location in the Greater Mekong Subregion, it could assume a pivotal role in linking Southeast Asia with East and South Asia, as well as with southern China.

**Healthy and mature Thai-Vietnamese relations**

Thai-Vietnamese relations are perceived by the Thai media as generally healthy. As Kavi Chongkittavorn of the Nation Group has observed, “Thai-Vietnamese relations today are superb. The relationship is amazingly better than Thailand’s relations with any other country in ASEAN. Thailand and Vietnam have succeeded in solving almost all outstanding bilateral problems.”

In his special contributions to *Komchatluek* to mark the thirtieth anniversary of Thai-Vietnamese diplomatic relations, Kavi traced the gradual improvement of the relationship, especially following the introduction of *doi moi* in 1986. With this policy, foreign journalists were allowed greater freedom. On the Thai side, prime minister Chatichai’s policy of “turning battlefields into marketplaces” also made it possible for the Vietnamese news agency to maintain an office in Thailand.

As a Thai journalist stationed in Vietnam during this early period of its opening to the outside world, Kavi related that he learned from Nguyen Co Thach as early as 1988 that Vietnam would eventually be in ASEAN. In his view, this was a truly positive attitude of the Vietnamese leadership that contributed much to the later development of Vietnam’s relations with ASEAN and Thailand.

Another positive attitude as reported by the Thai press involves the current leadership’s perception of the past. According to foreign minister Nguyen Dy Nien, war belongs to the bygone age, and at that time Thailand might have been pressured by the United States to involve Thai troops in the war. Not only have more than thirty years passed since the end of the conflict, but also the situation is now totally different. The Thai press also reported his reference to
the relatively large ethnic Vietnamese community in Thailand. Most of these ethnic Vietnamese have become Thai citizens, and this represents a deep-rooted link of understanding between the two countries.50

The Thai media have certainly not failed to note the dramatic increase in the exchange of people, though the exchange remains unbalanced: that is, the annual number of Vietnamese tourists to Thailand has risen from a few hundreds to several hundred thousands a year, while only about thirty to forty thousand Thai visit Vietnam annually.51 However, now that visas are not required for visitors from both sides, and that the new Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge linking Mukdahan with Savannakhet opened in December 2006, a larger outflow of Thai tourists to Vietnam can be expected. The number of Thai tourists going to Vietnam through Laos already increased 73.3 percent in January-February 2007.52

One important element remains missing in this exciting prospect of future Thai-Vietnamese relations. That is, the cultural aspect of the relationship has not yet received sufficient attention. For instance, the general Thai public knows practically nothing about Vietnamese literary works. Again according to Kavi Chongkittavorn, the reason for this might be that, despite the currently growing two-way contacts, the political leaderships and the private sectors on both sides have not yet known each other well enough to appreciate the need to promote deeper cultural understanding.53

The private sector's perceptions: Vietnam as a new rising star

The Thai private sector's views have been culled partly from recent media coverage and partly from interviews and brainstorming discussions.54 The Thai private sector shares much of the Thai media's perception of Vietnam and of Thai-Vietnamese relations, but is more concerned about how the Thai will respond to the challenge of Vietnam's emergence as a highly dynamic force in Asia.

In the view of the Thai private sector, Vietnam has certainly assumed a new status as a competitor. Though there are naturally some concerns about this, Vietnam is generally not perceived as a
"threat," but rather as offering new business and other opportunities for Thailand. The outcome depends on how the Thai act to benefit from this new regional development.

A new regional force

Like the Thai media, Thai businessmen and investors are fully aware of Vietnam’s rising strengths and potentials that have made it a new regional force. For example, Vikrom Kromdith, president of Amata Foundation, has not failed to recognize Vietnam’s impressive economic performance. In his view, its important economic engine consists of the rising inflows of foreign capital, the expanding export sector whose main components include raw materials (oil and natural gas), textiles, leather products, and agricultural produce, and the booming tourism and other services. Moreover, together with extensive infrastructure improvement and expansion, it is developing various industries that are suited to its needs and conditions, including the ship-building industry.

The Thai businessman specifically highlighted the growth of foreign capital in Vietnam. US$ 56.24 billion has already flowed into the country to fund 6,635 investment projects. Singapore, Taiwan, South Korea, and Japan are among the countries with the largest investments. Vietnam has become another highly attractive site for investment apart from China.

Vietnam’s economic growth during the past one and a half decades has been spectacular in the eye of the Thai private sector. Even a businessman like Vikrom Kromdith, who has maintained large investment concerns in this country, feels unable to catch up with its progress. In the next twenty years, according to this leading Thai businessman, if the country continues as today, it will certainly step out as an economic leader in ASEAN.

Strong resource base

Vietnam’s strong resource base is generally recognized by all interested parties in Thailand. The Thai private sector has nevertheless more specifically highlighted its importance. As Vittaya Praisuwan, an advisor to the Board of Investment of Thailand, has pointed out, Vietnam’s rich natural and human resources, and its educational system and large labor force, could provide crucial
Thai stakeholders’ perceptions of Vietnam

support for its effort to reach the goal of becoming an industrializing country. In Vittaya Praisuwan’s own words,

Vietnam has a relatively rich natural resource base that, together with low-wage labor, has made it an increasingly attractive investment opportunity for foreign investors. Though still lagging behind Thailand in several respects, the latter should not be complaisant about this new competitor. In particular, the production costs in Vietnam remain low in comparison with those of Thailand; therefore, Thailand should make important adjustments to equip itself with more investment incentives other than tax measures, such as increasing labor skills.  

Strong future prospects

With a strong resource base, Vietnam, in the eye of the Thai private sector, has a strong potential to become an important economic force in the regional as well as global economy. For example, once the construction of Vietnam’s first oil refinery has been completed, its economy will have a growth rate comparable to that of China. It may even be able to out-perform China in this respect: for while the latter still needs to rely upon external energy sources, Vietnam is endowed with both high-grade coal and natural gas of its own.

Perceptions of Vietnam’s strong future prospects were confirmed by the representatives of the private sector in the interview and group-discussion sessions held by the Institute of Asian Studies. It was pointed out during these discussions that the country’s future prospects look quite promising in view of favorable internal and external developments.

The development of regional infrastructure, especially the East-West Economic Corridor and the North-South Economic Corridor, will significantly benefit Vietnam’s tourism and trade. Another important external development is a shift in focus of the trade route southward from China—away from the route from Kunming through Thailand to the route from Nanning through Hanoi and Haiphong.

Also in the external realm, Vietnam’s WTO membership will provide it with more privileges than those currently enjoyed by
other ASEAN countries. Moreover, in ASEAN itself, Vietnam will be in a strong position to benefit from the grouping’s development into an ASEAN Economic Community with free flows of capital, goods, services, and people. Vietnam also stands to gain from the expansion of its relations with countries like the United States and other major powers.

Vietnam’s internal conditions—such as the inflow of foreign investment funds and remittances from Viet kieu, political stability, and strict and efficient law enforcement—are also favorable to economic growth. Its industry not only has a comparative advantage in low-technology categories such as textiles and garments, but is also upgrading to the high-technology echelon including computers and electronics. Its agriculture also has great potential, including forestry and marine production (aquaculture and capture).

In the eye of the Thai private sector, Vietnam’s strong potential and prospects do not necessarily mean that Thailand is now in danger of losing in the growing competition between the two countries. Today’s economic competition is not a zero-sum game. Vietnam’s healthy competition with Thailand can benefit both economies.

A competitor that offers opportunities

Although there are concerns over competition in the rice market, and over competition for foreign capital, Vietnam is not facilely perceived as a “competitor.” The Thai private sector sees opportunities for bilateral cooperation and for Thailand to benefit from expanding trade and investment in Vietnam (and other countries in Indochina). For example, Prasert Petchmuni, president of the association of Thai businessmen in Vietnam, has pointed to the opportunity for Thai investment in animal farming and the animal food industry.61

Vietnam’s rapid growth creates shortages that Thailand can supply and investment opportunities that Thai businesses can fulfill. The next five years may be a window of opportunity after which competition will become more intense.62 The question is not whether Thailand will eventually be surpassed by Vietnam, but rather how will Thailand adjust to the Vietnam’s growth. The Thai
private sector is especially sensitive over human resources. Vietnam's large and dynamic labor force gives it a crucial advantage over Thailand, whose labor force sorely lacks sufficient training. As a source in the Thai private sector has pointed out, "We have so far neglected the need to prepare our labor force for employment in industry. Sometimes those with high school and college-level vocational qualifications, or even those who graduated from university, are not competent enough to work in the industry where they are employed." There is a widespread concern that Vietnam is outdoing Thailand in human resource development, particularly in higher education.

Public officials' perceptions: a competitor but no longer a threat

The Thai public sector's perceptions of Vietnam, which have been gleaned from press reports, published sources (including those in the internet), and from interviews and discussions, are strikingly close to those of its private counterpart, but more positive and even proactive. There is also a striking absence of any trace of the concern about a "Vietnamese threat" that characterized the Thai ruling elite's perceptions of this neighboring country less than two decades ago.

More prominent and real

There are today far more accessible public documents (published documents of government agencies and other public-sector organizations) on Vietnam than even in the recent past. This is not surprising in view of Thailand's expanding relations with this neighboring country. In comparison with the dearth of information (apart from classified official documents) in the past, the current "explosion" of information on Vietnam and other Indochinese countries, ranging from press reports (including the daily Mekong Community TV program on TITV) to official publications, is remarkable in that it testifies to what may be called a new public awareness of our neighbors.

Consisting mainly of facts and figures, the country profiles prepared by public-sector organizations such as the Board of Investment and the Export-Import Bank of Thailand, might not
tell us very much in terms of their “attitudes” to Vietnam. However, the detail in these country profiles betray the Thai government’s increased interest in this country. These public documents not only provide useful information for all interested parties—investors, policy-makers, and even academics—but they can also be regarded as “proactive” in orientation on the part of the present-day Thai government sector. They represent a basic “roadmap” for all those who want to find their way into this neighboring country.

**Vietnam as competitor and partner**

Thai public officials also voice concerns about Vietnam outperforming Thailand in many respects. For example, the Thai ambassador to Vietnam, Kittipong Na Ranong, recently told the Thai press on a visit to Hanoi that Thailand had lost approximately 90 percent of its traditional export markets to this new competitor. Yet the ambassador added that trade competition is normal in the world today, where countries do not compete only in the market of just one or two products. Moreover, in the case of Thailand and Vietnam, geographical proximity provides opportunities for cooperation and partnership such as in agricultural and marine production. Opportunities exist for Thai investors, and the Thai ambassador told the Thai press corps on a subsequent visit that he optimistically expected “a wave of investment” from Thailand.

Such views have been echoed by other public officials, including elected politicians. Former minister of industry Suriya Jungrunruangkit reassured the Thai people that Vietnam is not a competitor but rather a partner of Thailand. The Ministry of Industry’s permanent secretary, Chakramont Pasukvanich, reaffirmed this fundamental perception.

The views and attitudes expressed by public officials in group discussions and interviews emphasized the need to look at a “big picture” rather than concentrating on isolated cases such as Thailand’s loss of rice markets to Vietnam. A suggestion from the discussions and interviews is that we look at all three countries comprising Indochina. Vietnam’s close political and economic links with both Cambodia and Laos PDR have important implications.
here. Vietnam could play a pivotal role in promoting and facilitating regional cooperation projects, such as GMS and ACMECS, in which Thailand has been actively involved. While Thai-Vietnamese bilateral relations matter, the relationship should be placed in a broader regional perspective and pursued at this level as well.

**Vietnam as a partner in regional cooperation**

The idea that Vietnam may be a partner in regional and subregional cooperation makes the simple idea of Vietnam becoming Thailand’s competitor even more irrelevant.

During the brainstorming sessions, a suggestion was made that the new Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge linking Mukdahan and Savannakhet could be used to strengthen regional and bilateral relationships alike if these are properly nurtured at both levels. Given its closeness to Laos, Vietnam could have a crucial role in promoting closer cooperation not only among the three countries but also within the Greater Mekong Subregion as a whole.

The Thailand-Cambodia-Vietnam route along the Southern Coastal Corridor, for which Thailand has provided financial assistance in terms of soft loan and grant for the construction of roads and four bridges from Koh Kong to Sramble in Cambodia, is another project that Thailand should more actively pursue on a multilateral level to cultivate cordial and fruitful relations with its neighbors. Indeed, it is on the regional level involving Vietnam that Thailand can perhaps more fruitfully further its cooperation with the other two Indochinese countries, Cambodia and Laos.

It was also pointed out during the discussions and interviews that the adoption of such a “regional” approach to Vietnam may have important implications for the growing presence of China in this region. China’s trade with the GMS countries has grown substantially. China has also been involved in the development of the region’s communication routes, including the construction of the third Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge over the Mekong connecting Chiang Khong on the Thai side with Huay Sai in Laos. Given its experience in dealing with China since ancient times, Vietnam’s participation in such a “regional” approach to China will be of great importance.

The Thai public sector has become not only more positive but
also more "proactive" towards Vietnam, as testified by the National Economic and Social Development Board's *Thai Policy on Cooperation with Neighboring Countries*. In contrast with Thailand's mostly "reactive" posture towards Vietnam in the past, this document proposes concrete collaborative projects that, in the context of Thai-initiated cooperative frameworks and strategies like ACMECS, represent a most notable shift in the country's policy orientation towards its neighboring countries.

**Closer and more fruitful bilateral relations**

Thai-Vietnamese bilateral relations are now perceived by Thai public officials as exceptionally good. Those participating in the brainstorming sessions confirmed that the feeling of past enmity has disappeared, together with the mistrust that once profoundly influenced Thai-Vietnamese bilateral deals. This has facilitated progress on outstanding issues, such as the granting of Thai nationality to *Viet kieu* in Thailand. Moreover, positive (though largely symbolic) moves like the holding of a joint cabinet meeting in Thailand have made a good impression on the Vietnamese leadership.

The officials also understand the importance of economic links. According to Ambassador Kittipong Na Ranong, Thailand ranks eleventh among major investors in Vietnam. Yet the ambassador added that the Thai private sector has not fully grasped the opportunities available in Vietnam. Thai officials at the brainstorming discussions had a similar impression that the Thai people seem unwilling to compete in the outside world, and that Thai government agencies lack a broad vision of the real opportunities, especially in the service sector. These agencies seem to be more interested in less urgent matters such as the promotion of Thai food!

**Thai academics' perceptions: better and more sympathetic understanding**

The "perceptions" of Thai academics are revealed by individual academics' views on Vietnam, and also by the state of "Vietnamese studies" in Thailand. It is impossible, however, to provide a full account here of the current state of "Vietnamese studies" (in the
general sense of Vietnam-related academic interests and activities) in Thailand. This survey covers only certain events, activities, and developments reflecting the Thai academic community’s changing views on Vietnam, as well as opinions expressed in the media and the interview and brainstorming sessions.

Knowing Vietnam

The Thai have been notable for their extremely limited knowledge of their neighbors. For example, the number of Thai people (except some living in border areas) in the public and private sectors, as well as in the academic community, who have a working knowledge of Burmese, Lao, Khmer, or Vietnamese, is very small indeed. Hence, any change in this orientation should be included in a study of Thai academics’ perceptions of neighboring countries. The Thai academic interest in Vietnam may be said to have undergone important change. Once mainly concentrated on history and politics (areas in which Vietnam’s “security threat” figured most prominently), it has now widened to cover language, culture, and society. Though the number of Vietnam specialists in Thailand remains relatively small, the rising interest in this country among Thai academics is unmistakable.

The post-Cold War change in the regional situation and the consequent improvement of relations between Thailand and Vietnam account for this important change in the academic atmosphere in Thailand. Moreover, the rise of Vietnam as an important economic force in Asia has attracted the attention of Thai academics. All these developments have the important effect of encouraging an unprecedented growth in Vietnam-related academic interests and activities in Thailand during the past decade.

The end of the 1980s marked a new period in Thai-Vietnamese relations. Informal contacts started, in which many Thai academics were involved. Academic studies of Vietnam, which had started earlier, entered a new era with Thai graduate students in both Thailand and abroad. Cherdkiat Atthakorn’s MA thesis on the Vietnamese communist movement, submitted to Silpakorn University in 1989, is one of the earliest works of this period. Another is Kosum Saichand, Imperialism and the Socialist Revolution in Vietnam (Chiang Mai: Chiang Mai University, 1989). Other

Many other works, mostly in the form of articles published in academic journals or book-form anthologies, also appeared, together with studies such as *Thai-Indochinese Trade* (1992). The Thailand Research Fund (TRF), in collaboration with the Institute of Asian Studies (IAS), Chulalongkorn University, commissioned a number of Vietnamese academics to explore and analyze particular aspects of their country. Final reports were submitted to a seminar in Thailand in 1996. Another important joint TRF-IAS effort during this time was the compilation and publication of a Thai-Vietnamese/Vietnamese-Thai dictionary.

In 2001, the Institute of Asian Studies, in collaboration with its counterparts in Vietnam, organized a conference in Bangkok to commemorate the twenty-fifth anniversary of Thai-Vietnamese diplomatic relations. The conference featured presentations by Thai and Vietnamese academics, subsequently published as *Twenty-Five Years of Thai-Vietnamese Relationship*. A similar event was held five years later at the Faculty of Arts, Chulalongkorn University, to celebrate the thirtieth anniversary of the relationship. This time the focus was more on cultural than academic activities. Apart from an informal panel discussion, the event was essentially a Vietnam cultural fair with food being its main feature, and produced no concrete academic output. However, it clearly indicated a greater “openness” in Thai society not only for those seeking to know Vietnam better but also for the ethnic-Vietnamese community in Thailand to “expose” itself to the Thai people in general—and, of course, to the world.

The event indeed gave the impression that ethnic Vietnamese, whether or not they had been granted Thai nationality, were no longer inhibited about their identity. Many of them proudly dressed in their traditional costumes while at the same time saying they were Thai. This is a really good sign that Thai society is now open to ethnic and cultural diversity.
The 2005 publication of a very important research work on Viet kieu in Thailand81 also marks greater openness in Thai-Vietnamese relations. The work was a Thai-Vietnamese collaborative endeavor that resulted from extensive field studies in both Thailand and Vietnam. It presents detailed life stories of the Viet kieu, both those still living in Thailand and those who were repatriated some three to four decades ago. The publication of this work represents an informal recognition that the Viet kieu still living in Thailand belong in Thai society and have an important role in cementing Thai-Vietnamese relations.

The Diaries of Dang Thuy Tram,82 a medical doctor who lost her life while on field duty during the Vietnam War, were also translated and published. A round-table discussion on the war and a cultural performance were staged to launch this translation in August 2007. The translation and publication of a book on Thai-Vietnamese relations by a Vietnamese scholar, Dr. Hoang Khac Nam83 was marked by a round-table discussion held in the following September.

Relations on the basis of better understanding

The unprecedented growth of academic interest in Vietnam has naturally led to better understanding of this close neighbor among Thai academics, as well as some segments of the public. The academics who are Vietnam specialists are generally sympathetic to Vietnam: these people are highly enthusiastic about the vast improvement of Thai-Vietnamese relations during the past decade. Some of them are critical of the Thai government for its tardiness in granting nationality or other legal statuses to Viet kieu in Thailand.84 Such criticism has been directed especially at the foot-dragging behavior of government officials, particularly those with Cold-War mind-sets, who still harbor suspicions and mistrust of these ethnic Vietnamese.85

The few Thai academics who were interviewed or participated in the brainstorming sessions86 all have positive perceptions of Vietnam. This better understanding is not only indicative of better knowledge of Vietnam (or, at least, an awareness of its importance), but also of a more sympathetic attitude.

Like other stakeholders, Thai academics are well aware that
Vietnam seems to be out-performing Thailand in various respects. Most notably, Vietnam’s economic performance indicates that it is now really “breathing behind our neck.” An economist interested in world competitiveness rankings has pointed out that while Vietnam still remains far behind Thailand in a recent ranking by World Economic Forum, a closer comparison of the two countries reveals that Vietnam is not that far behind. Thailand is still in the lead only in three sectors, namely, infrastructure, higher education and training, and business sophistication; in other sectors (or “pillars”) the differences between the two countries have been significantly narrowed down. In the health and primary education pillar, Vietnam seems to have been doing better than Thailand. 

This is certainly not a concern about traditional power competition. Comparisons of this sort have been made mostly as a warning to, or even as a criticism of Thailand. The message is quite clear: Thailand has already been left far behind by Singapore and Malaysia; hence, do not let another neighboring country push ahead. The chief concern that has been reflected by all groups of stakeholders is that Vietnam is out-performing Thailand in almost all important respects, even in education and sports. Another academic has recently noted that Thailand has invested more heavily in education than Vietnam, but Vietnam seems to be performing far better in this sector.

Like other stakeholders, or indeed the Thai people in general, Thai academics certainly know very well that in a world in which competition is a way of normal international life the real threat to Thailand lies in its failure to keep up with regional and global developments. Equally, or even more important is the new attitude of perhaps most of the Thai people (not only Thai academics) towards Vietnam—one which is not only more positive, but also rooted in better understanding of this neighboring country. It is indeed such understanding that provide a truly strong basis for enriching relations between the two countries.

Conclusion

This albeit incomplete survey of stakeholders’ perceptions of Vietnam and Thai-Vietnamese relations reveals some attitudinal
patterns that are helping to shape Thai policy towards Vietnam.

Vietnam as a more important regional actor

Thai stakeholders see Vietnam becoming increasingly strong and more internationally active, yet they do not view this as representing any “threat” to Thailand. This attitude becomes even more remarkable if we contrast it with the mistrust and suspicion that plagued Thai-Vietnamese relations even in the recent past. The perception clearly indicates that the relationship has become truly “healthy.”

Vietnam as a partner in regional cooperation

A significant implication of a stronger and more active Vietnam is that it is a now a crucial factor in regional cooperation. Not only is it not perceived as a threat, or a destabilizing factor in any way, but it is also viewed as assuming a more important role in the Southeast Asian region and beyond. Its role is crucial, for instance, for Thailand’s relations with the other Indochinese countries, and it could be a vital factor in ASEAN’s relations with China.

Vietnam as a partner rather than competitor

It is quite natural that some Thai people are deeply concerned about Vietnam becoming our increasingly stronger competitor. However, there are at the same time opportunities for cooperation and partnership. Opportunities for Thai investors, in particular, do exist, and prospects for bilateral as well as multilateral cooperation are very good indeed. Therefore, most Thai stakeholders see Vietnam more as a partner than a competitor of Thailand.

A mature relationship

Thai-Vietnamese relations are perceived by the Thai stakeholders as generally close and cordial. On both sides the past seems to represent a bygone age. Not only have more than thirty years passed since the end of the conflict, but also the situation is now totally different. Outstanding issues, including those relating to Viet kieu in Thailand, have been solved. Moreover, with growing exchanges of all types, and at all levels, especially between the people of the two countries, the relationship is becoming truly
mature. As a Vietnamese academic, Dr. Hoang Khac Nam, has confirmed, today the Vietnamese people are only interested in how, and when, Vietnam will defeat Thailand in a football match!

Notes

1 This study is part of a research project on Thailand and the neighboring countries. With funding support by the Research Institute on Contemporary Southeast Asia (IRASEC), the project focuses on current Thai stakeholders’ perceptions of all close neighbors on mainland Southeast Asia, namely, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam. This part of the research project focuses upon Thai stakeholders’ perceptions of present-day Vietnam as well as Thai-Vietnamese relations. It must be pointed out here that this part of the research is only a preliminary study. Its empirical base is very limited. A far more extensive research, consisting of both interviews and other information-gathering activities (e.g., a more extensive study of public and private documents such as Vietnam-related official and company reports), is required. Moreover, one important group of stakeholders, the non-governmental organizations interested in Thai-Vietnamese relations that have emerged in recent years, most notably friendship associations and the Viet kieu communities in both Thailand and Vietnam, have been left unexplored. I am most grateful to Chulalongkorn University’s Institute of Asian Studies for having included me in this research project. I would also like to thank IRASEC for the funding it gave to the project. My thanks also go to my colleagues in the research team and, in particular, our energetic and efficient research assistant, Rapeeporn Tanamai, for the hard work and collaborative spirit they have invested in this collective enterprise.

2 Since the mid seventeenth century, Cambodia had been a target of both Thai and Vietnamese expansionism. There were repeated Thai and Vietnamese incursions usually instigated by rivalries between competing claimants to the Cambodian throne. Though from 1771 to the early nineteenth century the Vietnamese were preoccupied with an internal strife caused by the Tayson Rebellion, hence allowing the Thai to enhance their influence in Cambodia, the Thai-Vietnamese rivalry resumed, especially after King Ang Chan (r. 1806–35) decided to pay homage to both Bangkok and Hue. It was not until 1845 that the Thai and Vietnamese courts finally agreed to a compromise that resulted in Cambodia being placed under a joint guardianship of Siam and Vietnam. Amity between the two courts existed mainly during the reign of Emperor Gia-long, who had been assisted by King Rama I in the former’s struggle with the Tayson Rebellion.

3 The Thai people were generally sympathetic to Vietnam in its struggle for independence. However, the concern about communist expansionism, together with US influence over the Thai government at that time, pushed Thailand to side with the anti-communist camp led by the US.

4 The Vietnam Communist Party was first set up in February 1930 as the
Indochina Communist Party incorporating Vietnamese, Lao, and Cambodian communist movements. The ICP was disbanded in 1951, and national parties were founded in the three Indochinese countries. The VCP assumed a new name, *Dang Lao Dong Vietnam* (Vietnam Workers Party), that remained in use until the country was reunified in July 1976, when the Party's present name, VCP, was adopted, together with the change of the country's name from Democratic Republic of Vietnam to Socialist Republic of Vietnam.

"Viet-Minh" was a short form for *Vietnam Doc Lap Dong Minh Hoi* (League for Independence of Vietnam). It was led by the VCP in its struggle against France following the latter's attempt to resume control of Indochina after the end of World War Two.

The communist forces were mostly concentrated in northern Vietnam, while the southern part of the country still remained a French stronghold. A puppet government under former Emperor Bao Dai was set up by France as an anti-communist alternative to the communist regime in the north.

Thai policy towards the nationalist movements in Indochina had changed since the late 1940s. With the change of government in 1947, in particular, communist elements in these nationalist movements were forced out of Thai territory.

Most Vietnamese refugees had fled the Indochina War after World War Two. Some of them were repatriated in the 1960s, and those who remained were suspected by the Thai authorities of being sympathetic towards Ho Chi Minh and his communist regime in North Vietnam. As refugees, they were kept under close surveillance by the authorities, with their movements normally being restricted to their provinces of residence. Today the Department of Provincial Administration has 39,000 Vietnamese refugees registered in twenty provinces across the country. Though their children born in Thailand have been granted Thai citizenship, a large number of them have not yet been given alien ID cards that guarantee their rights to live, and complete freedom of movement, in the country. For example, Nguyen Van Hai, 78, who fled the Indochina War sixty years ago to Mukdahan was only provided with an alien ID card in September 2006. See Onnucha Hutasingh, 'Bridge will forge family union,' *Bangkok Post*, 18 December 2006.

Conflict between China and the Soviet Union had been fermenting since the late 1950s, and came to a head with a violent border clash in March 1969. The incident is believed to have played a major role in reorienting China's policy, especially towards the United States, in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Both Sino-Vietnamese and Vietnam-Cambodia conflicts can be traced far into the past. The tension between China and Vietnam, in particular, had already been under way during the Vietnam War in which the two countries were comrades in arms. Big-power rivalry and conflict simply complicated these deep-rooted conflicts.

See Becky Katz, 'ASEAN’s Engagement with Vietnam and Burma.'
requested to head a coalition government comprising Democratic Kampuchea (Pol Pot's group), and two other anti-Vietnamese factions. This strategy succeeded in mobilizing the support for the continuation of United Nations recognition of the coalition government until after the signing of a peace agreement in October 1991. In anticipation of an impending settlement of conflict, the Phnom Penh government adopted a new name, State of Cambodia, in 1989. It probably hoped this would make it more acceptable to the international community. It also initiated domestic policy change that eventually led to the abandonment of socialism.

This framework document envisaged a plan for a major United Nations role in bringing peace to Cambodia through peace-keeping operations, as well as a UN transitory administration of the country pending UN-supervised free elections to allow the Cambodian people to determine their political future. ‘Cambodia – UNTAC: Background’ http://www.un.org/Depts/dpko/dpko/commission/untacbackgr1.htm.


Cited by Katz, ‘ASEAN’s Engagement with Vietnam and Burma.’

The agreement on visa exemption, which was signed on 9 May 2000 and which came into effect on the following 9 July, enables Thai and Vietnamese people to enter and travel in each other’s country freely for one month without visas.

Ho Chi Minh proclaimed Vietnam’s independence and brought the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) into being on 2 September 1945. However, the struggle for independence continued, first with the French in the First Indochina War (1946–54), which resulted in Vietnam being divided into two parts (and two “Vietnams” thus came into existence, namely, North Vietnam or DRV and South Vietnam or Republic of Vietnam), and then with the United States in the Second Indochina War (or “American War” as the Vietnamese call it), which ended only on 30 April 1975. The VCP was in full control of the country when North and South Vietnams were formally reunified in July 1976.

Earlier developments after the formation of the VCP in February 1930 include the change of the party’s name at the second party congress at Tuyen Quang in 1951 from Indochinese Communist Party to Vietnam Workers Party (Dang Lao Dong Vietnam) and the adoption, at the third party congress in Hanoi in 1960, of the tasks of constructing socialism in North Vietnam as well as carrying out the revolution in the South.


For a good piece on Vietnamese politics today, see Martin Gainsborough, ‘Rethinking Vietnamese politics: will the real state please stand up?’ presented at the Vietnam Update at the Australian National University, Canberra, on 11–2 August 2005, available at: www.bristol.ac.uk/politics/grc/bvp/bvpworkingpapers

Vietnam continues to import finished petroleum products because its first oil refinery is still under construction. The construction of the US$ 2.5 billion Dung Quat Refinery in Quang Ngai Province in central Vietnam (near Da Nang) started in November 2005 and is expected to be completed within three years. Once in full operation, the refinery will produce 6.5 million tons of petroleum products.

The largest investor (in terms of both projects and value of investment fund) in Vietnam is Taiwan, followed by Singapore and Japan. Thailand is ranked ninth with 125 projects and total capital of US$ 1.474 million.


In its regular column on Indochina, *Phujatkan* carries daily reports covering virtually all aspects of Vietnam today, from daily life to important economic and political events and developments. These can be retrieved from *Manager Online* (www.manager.co.th). A visit on 18 August 2007 yielded twenty pages of news coverage containing 200 pieces dating from 26 March to 17 August 2007.

Here I cite only major articles, mostly drawn from the papers' online versions.


‘The exact figures quoted by the different Thai papers are different. For example, *Krungthep Thurakit*, 30 April 2007, reported that Vietnam has maintained an average 7.5 percent growth rate during the past several years. The 2006 figure was quoted by the paper as 8.2 percent.


‘The Vietnamese people have benefited a great deal from remittances from Viet Kieu or overseas Vietnamese. According to *Krungthep Thurakit*, the annual value of these remittances amounts to more than 5 US$ 5 billion; see ‘Is Vietnam surpassing Thailand?’

Kavi, ‘Vietnam: The little dragon breathing fire (part 3).’


‘Is Vietnam surpassing Thailand?’


Kavi, ‘Vietnam: The little dragon breathing fire (part 3).’

The following September, it was reported in the Thai press that Vietnam boasted of foreign direct investment projects with a total value of US$ 50 billion were waiting to be endorsed. *Phujatkan*, 6 September 2007.


Kavi, ‘Vietnam: The little dragon breathing fire (part 3).’

Sutthichai Yoon, ‘If Vietnam’s prime minister is among the progressive
leaders, where are the Thai leaders?’ Khomchatluek, 25 May 2007.
  
43 Phujatkan, 2 August 2007.

44 Krungthep Thurakit, 30 April 2007.

45 Vietnam’s role in international affairs has been recorded, among other sources, in Kavi Chongkittavorn, ‘Thirty years of Thai-Vietnamese relations.’ This series of short articles was published in the author’s column in Khomchatluek in July–August 2006 to mark the thirtieth anniversary of diplomatic relations between the two countries. To simplify the references, citations of this source will not specify the parts and the exact dates of their appearance in this daily paper.


48 Kavi, ‘Thirty years.’

49 Kavi, ‘Thirty years.’

50 ‘Is Vietnam surpassing Thailand?’

51 Kavi, ‘Thirty years.’ The article also reported the problem of precious stones, wild orchids, and wild birds (especially a rare species of parrots) being smuggled out of Vietnam.

52 Phujatkan, 10 April 2007.

53 Kavi, ‘Thirty years.’

54 ‘Two sessions of interviews and brainstorming discussions, one for public officials and the other for representatives of the private sector, were held on 2–3 April 2007 at Chulalongkorn University’s Institute of Asian Studies. The views and comments from this two-day event are not attributed here.

55 We are not here fully repeating what the Thai press has already reported. However, in order to achieve some comprehensiveness in our presentation, the private sector’s perceptions similar to those of the media have been summarily included in this section whose focus is on its more specific views and attitudes.


57 Vikrom, ‘Vikrom’s outlook on the world.’


59 Vittaya Praisuwan, cited in ‘Is Vietnam surpassing Thailand?’

60 Vikrom Kromdith, ‘Vikrom’s outlook on the world: introducing Vietnam (final part).’

61 ‘Is Vietnam surpassing Thailand?’

62 ‘Is Vietnam surpassing Thailand?’

63 Quoted in ‘Is Vietnam surpassing Thailand?’

64 The Vietnamese government has set a target for one of its universities to be among the world’s top 200 universities, and several others to be among the world’s top 500, by the year 2020. The effort Vietnam is now investing in this project gives the impression that this is a real possibility. Phujatkan, 24 August 2007.

65 Socialist Republic of Vietnam (Bangkok: Export-Import Bank of Thailand, June 2006) and Vietnam (Bangkok: Board of Investment).
Thai stakeholders' perceptions of Vietnam

66 'Is Vietnam surpassing Thailand?'
67 'Is Vietnam surpassing Thailand?'
69 'Is Vietnam surpassing Thailand?'

This regional development project was not mentioned in the discussions and interviews on 2–3 April 2007. It figured in an official document representing the Thai government's policy line of a similar orientation, and was therefore included here to further substantiate this important point. See Arkhom Termpittayapaisith, *Thai Policy on Cooperation with Neighboring Countries* (Bangkok: National Economic and Social Development Board, 13 January 2006).

71 Arkhom, *Thai Policy*.

72 Thailand was mostly “reactive” to perceived Vietnamese threats: it was so preoccupied with how to cope with such threats that it practically initiated no proactive policy plans.

73 ‘Is Vietnam surpassing Thailand?’ The Ministry of Planning and Investment released investment figures a year later that placed Thailand twelfth spot among seventy-nine countries that have invested in Vietnam. The 153 Thai investment projects in Vietnam amounted to a total of US$ 1,540 million-registered capital. Thai investment has concentrated on construction, including the construction of infrastructure in the various industrial zones, the construction of housing estates and trade and service centers, including tourist hotels and other tourist service centers, in the urban areas.

74 ‘Is Vietnam surpassing Thailand?’

75 See Pornpen Huntrakool, ‘Vietnam heading towards the new millennium,’ *Journal of the Faculty of Arts: Silpakorn University* 22, 2 (December 1999–May 2000).

76 The first known Thai graduate student specializing in Vietnamese studies was Taweeporn Vasavakul, who completed her PhD thesis at Cornell University in the latter half of the 1980s. Another Thai student who later became a Vietnam specialist is Sud Jonjerdsin: his PhD thesis on Vietnamese history was completed at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London.

77 This thesis was published in 1997 by the Social Science and Humanities Textbook Foundation with the financial support of the Thailand Research Fund.

78 This study is the result of a collective research of the Institute of Asian Studies, Chulalongkorn University.

79 Though the project's output was called 'Vietnam as perceived by the Vietnamese,' it represents a major effort on the Thai side to know and understand this country better.

80 Thanyathip Sripana, Pham Duc Thanh, and Theera Nuchpiam (ed.), *Twenty-Five Years of Thai-Vietnamese Relationship* (Bangkok: Institute of Asian Studies, 2003).


82 The work was translated by Dr. Montira Rato of the Faculty of Arts, Chulalongkorn University, and published by Kob Fai Press in 2007.


The behavior of these officials should not be regarded as harboring any racial prejudice against ethnic Vietnamese. Their treatment of other ethnic minorities, and even those ethnic Thai who for some reason or another have become stateless (there are many of them in the northern border areas of Thailand), is symptomatic of a complex security-dominated mentality that usually results in a lack of sympathy for these people. Their attitude and behavior have been further complicated by the problem of rampant bribery and corruption in the Thai bureaucracy.

Apart from the two academics participating in the brainstorming sessions, three were interviewed, two of them in Ubon Ratchathani, and one in Bangkok. The interviews were conducted as informal discussions on the major issues of this study rather than guided by predetermined questions.


Kiatanant, ‘Watch out!’

Phujatkan, 9 June 2007.

If Dr. Hoang Khac Nam’s comment at the round table discussion on Thai-Vietnamese relations at Chulalongkorn University on 19 September 2007 may be taken as representing the view of the Vietnamese people in general, this attitude of the Thai is very well reciprocated by that of their Vietnamese counterparts.