

Con Dzung Dang Xuan¹

Entrevista realizada por el Secretario del Departamento de Asia y el Pacífico del IRI
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1. *In the last years, the Vietnamese government held the APEC Summit as well as the regional WEF. In your opinion, what is the importance of multilateralism in Vietnam Foreign Policy?*

Throughout history, multilateralism has played an important role in our cause of national construction and defense since the foundation of the new Vietnam in 1945. We became a member of the United Nations in 1977, of ASEAN, ASEM and APEC in the 1990s and of WTO in 2007. We have also joined the network of free trade agreements with almost all leading global economic and trade centers. These activities have inevitably raised Vietnam's position and prestige in the international arena, facilitating Vietnam's comprehensive integration into the world.

Telling you all these, I would like to highlight this point: in recent years, multilateralism has become a strategic orientation of primary importance in Vietnam foreign policy. The policy has been pursued and realized through three diplomatic channels: State diplomacy, including Parliamentary diplomacy, Party diplomacy and people-to-people diplomacy. As such, we have consolidated friendship and solidarity with various peoples, gaining their support for our cause and, at the same time, actively contributing to the settlement of regional and global issues.

Vietnam is also determined to be a pro-active stakeholder of the world community to help formulate various multilateral institutions on the basis of transparency, fairness, democracy and sustainability. So far, the combination of multilateral and bilateral activities in international affairs (in our foreign policy) has resulted in positive and encouraging achievements for Vietnam. Vietnam's successes in organizing major multilateral events in our country including APEC 2017, regional WEF 2018 and Vesak this year provide us with vivid testimonies in this respect.

2. *Recently Vietnam has ratified the CPTPP, as well as signed a FTA with the EU. Could it be possible to sign an FTA between Vietnam and Mercosur?*

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Vietnam's recent ratification of the Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement (CPTPP) and our signing of a Free Trade Agreement with the EU have illustrated not only Vietnam's determination to actively integrate into the international economy but also its goodwill and enthusiasm to be a reliable partner in negotiating with various countries and groupings.

Regarding a Vietnam-Mercosur Free Trade Agreement, both Vietnam and Argentina have shown interest in negotiating such an agreement, as noted in the joint statement during President Mauricio Macri's visit to Vietnam earlier this year. Mercosur members and Vietnam have started the process. Given the goodwill, determination and skills from both sides, I think that a Vietnam – Mercosur FTA can be possible even though it may take us some time to achieve the goal.

3. Which are the main features of Vietnam as a trade partner and a business destination?

Vietnam entertains economic links with over 200 economies all over the world. We are the 6th biggest economy in South East Asia with political stability and policy consistency. We boast a multi-sectoral market economy where the state sector plays a leading role, but the private sector is assuming a much greater significance, accounting for 40% of the GDP. The current number of 715.000 private enterprises is expected to mount to 1 million in 2020. Demographically, 60% of the population is under 35 years of age and middle-incomers are growing rapidly. Purchasing power potential is thus enormous.

In the last decades or so, Vietnam has sustained a 6-7% GDP growth rate. In 2018, our GDP growth rate was 7.08%. The GDP per capita was 2.500 USD and inflation was curbed at 3.54%. Last year, our total volume of trade was valued at over 482 million USD, the best record in the past 10 years, doubling our GDP, which shows how much we are open to the world. I can go on and on with these statistics but I would like to assure you that Vietnam holds great potential for trade and business with the outside world with so many opportunities for exploitation.

4. Last February president Macri visited Vietnam, the third Argentine to do so, making Vietnam the country of Southeast Asia visited more times by an Argentine head of state in the last 25 years. What is your consideration of Argentina and Vietnam relations?

Vietnam and Argentina established diplomatic relations on October 25, 1973 and in 2010 the bilateral comprehensive partnership was officially founded. I therefore think our relationship is marked by two notable traits: traditional and comprehensive.

The first characteristic sheds lights on our longtime understanding of and sympathy for each other, since the time Vietnam was still struggling to gain back its independence and reunification in the 1970s. It helps explain the appreciation we reserve for each other through the ups and downs of the world situation over the past 45 years.

The second characteristic, on the other hand, shows us the way to develop our relations much further now and in the future. As a matter of fact, the bilateral relations have provided us with many reasons to be optimistic, especially in political, economic and trade fields. Our leaders meet regularly through the exchange of delegations, even at the highest level as you mention in your question. In trade, the import-export turnover between the

two countries is increasing, reaching almost 3 billion USD in 2018, doubling after 5 years, making Vietnam Argentina's second important market in Asia and fifth in Argentina's global export markets. The potential for further bilateral cooperation, however, is great, especially in agriculture, energy and biotechnology. However, investment is a field that we should work together much more so that the interest of our two people can be better served.

5. Which are the main areas / fields / issues in which Argentina and Vietnam are pursuing cooperation?

Over the past years, our two countries have cooperated effectively in various fields, such as trade and economic, science and technology, energy, healthcare and education. Our two economies can be complementary to each other. Vietnam enjoys the relative edge in textile industry and Argentina should take advantage of this strength of Vietnam. We have good skilled labor in producing electronic chips and spare parts, machinery assembling and additive manufacturing process and agricultural plantation. Meanwhile, Argentina boasts strengths in agriculture, dairy products, machinery and biotechnology. These are areas that we can focus our cooperation on in the time to come.

6. Regarding the new impetus of ASEAN and Mercosur relations, since the recent FMM in 2017 and the recent adherence to the TAC by Argentina in 2018 (as the second member country of Mercosur after Brazil in 2012), in your opinion which are the main opportunities and challenges for closer relations between ASEAN and Mercosur?

Mercosur as a group, and Argentina in particular, have recently promoted their cooperative relationship with ASEAN. This fact demonstrates increased awareness of both groupings about each other's significance and role in our respective regions and inter-regional relations. In my opinion, there are many opportunities for both sides to utilize. For instance, expansion of trade relations would greatly benefit our two groups because ASEAN is a huge developing market with over 650 million people whereas Mercosur, with Argentina and Brazil as two leading economies in South America, is able to provide ASEAN with what we need such as soya beans, animal feed, meat, fruits and dairy products, and vice versa. Apart from helping each other to increase engagement with the private sector, in particular of micro, small and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs) and encourage regular business interaction and participation in each other's trade and investment fairs, we can do a lot together in such other fields as sustainable development cooperation, tourism, connectivity, innovation and people-to-people links. I also see a lot of opportunities in our bilateral technical cooperation in advanced agriculture, biotechnology and energy.

However, we have to cope with various challenges on our road ahead too. I may mention the geographical distance, cultural and language differences and limited information on opportunities for trade and investment.

Nevertheless, identifying opportunities and challenges is a very important step for both ASEAN and Mercosur in our common effort to promote our bilateral cooperation. Looking at what we have achieved so far, I am confident that the future for cooperation between ASEAN and Mercosur is bright, but we all need to work hard for it. For its part, Vietnam is willing to actively contribute to the endeavor as much as we can in the interest of the peoples of our two regions.