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## EXPERTS SPEAK

### **Ethical Practices in League Gaming in India**

*Ritesh Misra, Dhaval Rajyaguru, Karan Vakharia*

## ARTICLES

**Jayadeva Ranade** – *Does the CPEC Really Help Pakistan?*

**Rup Narayan Das** – *Media and India-China Relations*

**Rajaram Panda** – *India-Vietnam Relations: Prospects and Challenges*

**C. Abhyankar, Manoj Kumar, S. Sidharth** – *Defence R&D: An Insight into DRDO*

**Asheesh Shrivastava, Yogita Khare** – *Recycling of Products Causing Pollution*

**Jayadev Parida** – *A Stronger Data Protection Regime for a Better Digital India*

**Ytharth Kumar, Sreyoshi Guha** – *Sedition: Crucifixion of Free Speech and Expression?*

## BOOK REVIEWS

**Rajaram Panda**\*

***India-Vietnam Relations: Prospects  
and Challenges***

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**Introduction**

The India-Vietnam relationship is one of the most significant bilateral relationships in Asia, besides the India-Japan partnership. Over the years, in particular since the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two on 7 January 1972, this bilateral tie has assumed robustness in a number of areas, ranging from politico-strategic, defence to economic areas as well as culture, education, training, entrepreneurship development, etc.

There have been continual exchanges of visits of top leaders between the two countries on a regular basis, further cementing the mutual ties and seeking newer means to explore the new vistas so that both can maximize mutual gains. It would not be wrong to say that no other country within the ASEAN grouping has received the kind of importance and undivided attention that Vietnam is getting from India. This is the reason that makes India-Vietnam relations something very special.

The year 2017 marks the 45th year anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between Vietnam and India and 10 year anniversary of the “Strategic Partnership”, which had been established in July 2007, and was later elevated to a “Comprehensive Strategic Partnership”, during the current Prime Minister, Narendra Modi’s visit to Hanoi in September 2016. Though 45-years is a comparatively smaller period for a civilizational relationship, the strides made during this period are significant and worthy of mention. These two anniversaries are thus significant milestones of Indo-Vietnam ties. Since the days of the first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru and President Rajendra Prasad, and almost all top political leaders of India – be it the

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President, the Vice-President, the Speaker, or many of the other senior Ministers, etc. – all of them have paid visits to Vietnam over the years, underlining the importance India attaches to Vietnam. PM Modi's visit added much more significance because he was the first Indian Prime Minister to visit Vietnam in the past 15 years.

These visits have been happily and enthusiastically reciprocated by Vietnam as well. The founder of Vietnam, Ho Chi Minh is held in high reverence by the people of India. In continuation to these on-going dialogues, the first week of December 2016 saw two important visits by high-level delegations from Vietnam to India as a first step for celebration of the 45<sup>th</sup> anniversary of diplomatic relations between the two countries in 2017. Vietnam's Defence Minister Ngo Xuan Lich visited India from 3<sup>rd</sup> to 5<sup>th</sup> December and held talks with his Indian counterpart, Manohar Parrikar, besides having met Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the National Security Advisor Ajit Doval.

On his way to the G-20 summit meeting in Hangzhou, China, and the East Asia Summit and related Summits at Vientiane, Laos, Prime Minister Narendra Modi made his maiden visit to Vietnam to hold wide-ranging talks with the country's top leadership on ways to bolster strategic bilateral ties in key areas like defense, security, counter-terrorism and trade. This visit marked a first by an Indian Prime Minister visiting Vietnam for the first time in the last 15 years, and the fourth Indian Prime Minister to visit Vietnam in over five decades. It is therefore considered a significant landmark in the burgeoning relationship between the two countries. The last Prime Minister of India to visit Vietnam was in 2001, the then prime minister, Atal Behari Vajpayee.<sup>2</sup>

The relationship between India and Vietnam is however not at all recent; in fact it dates back to over more than 2,000 years, when Indian traders used to travel to Vietnam for commerce, taking along with them Buddhist monks to Vietnamese shores where they soon got assimilated with the local population and contributed to the local economy. The influence of Buddhism also dates back to that period. Buddhism was introduced in Vietnam, directly from India through the maritime route over 2,000 years ago. Trade and Buddhism facilitated a healthy exchange of ideas, technology, architecture, and cultural practices. These are visible even today. The Cham community in Vietnam, today and the presence of Hindu temples there is a living testimony to these historical links that both countries share. Addressing a conference on India-Vietnam relations organized by the Centre for Indian Studies, Hanoi, in March 2017, India's ambassador P. Harish observed:

The Champa civilization in central and southern parts of Vietnam encapsulated the influences of Hinduism and later on even imbibed the Buddhist influences alongside. With Hinduism and Buddhism becoming the mainstream religions and bringing about social, cultural and economic stability in Vietnam, worship of Buddha and the Hindu gods such as Shiva, Vishnu and Parvati also took into its fold local matrilineal and mother goddess modes of worship which are actually traditional to India. The exquisite architectural complex at My Son sanctuary which is today a UNESCO World Heritage site, and the ancient archaeological remains scattered in

the coastal areas of Vietnam from Danang to Binh Thuan, including the Po Nagar temple in Nha Trang and the Po Klong Garai temple in Phan Rang stand a time-tested testimony to our civilizational inheritance.

The relationship between the two countries has also witnessed many common historical experiences such as fighting against colonial rulers and standing by each other's sides in times of need. This relationship is therefore time-tested and has become robust and strengthened over the years. Prime Minister Modi's visit was just another milestone in this long journey of building a strong partnership between the two countries. In recent times, there have been other high-level visits also, including that of the President, their defence and External Affairs Ministers, etc. among others.

### **A Host of Agreements**

A host of issues have been discussed and several agreements reached between the two nations. These include a wide number of topics ranging from economic issues, strategic decisions, to defence, and even educational and cultural dialogues. The following were the major highlights: (i) up-grading the Indo-Vietnam relationship to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, which Hanoi so far only has with two other countries, namely Moscow and Beijing; (ii) announcement of a new defence credit line of \$500 million to Vietnam by India; (iii) signing of a contract for fast offshore patrol vessels by L&T with Vietnam Border Guards under \$100 million from the defense credit line given; (iv) agreement on cooperation in outer space for peaceful purposes; (v) Navy-to-Navy agreement on White Shipping information sharing; (vi) memorandum of understanding on cyber security; (vii) agreement for India to assist Vietnam in participating in UN Peacekeeping; (viii) grant of \$5 million for a software park; (ix) MoU on cooperation in the IT sector; (x) MoU on setting up a Centre for Excellence in software development; (xi) postgraduate and doctorate scholarships for Buddhist and Sanskrit studies in India; (xii) Protocol on double taxation avoidance agreement; (xiii) MoU for mutual recognition of standards; (xiv) MoU on cooperation in health and medicine; (xv) MoU between the Indian Council for World Affairs and the Vietnamese Academy of Social Sciences; and (xvi) a Protocol on the celebration of the 45th anniversary of diplomatic relations.<sup>3</sup>

Besides holding extensive talks with his counterparts, Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc and President Tran Dai Quang, the Indian PM, Narendra Modi also met the Communist Party General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong and National Assembly Chairwoman Nguyen Thi Kim Ngan. Their talks ranged from matters on defence, security, science and technology, to trade and culture and the above-mentioned agreements were reached amicably. Prime Minister Modi also paid homage to their revered leader Ho Chi Minh, whom he described as one of twentieth century's tallest leaders and laid a wreath at the Monument of National Heroes and Martyrs, besides visiting the Quan Su Pagoda.

Ho Chi Minh's role in Vietnam's liberation movement is legendary. This iconic figure travelled to India and built a strong bonding with the people of India and found common grounds in his fight for liberation. This is echoed even today. Not only does Vietnam have a city named after him, he is also fondly called as "the Vietnamese George Washington". After his death, his embalmed body was kept in a mausoleum in the capital city of Hanoi and is worshipped by the Vietnamese people, and it was therefore apt for PM Modi to lay a wreath there.<sup>4</sup>

### **Defence Cooperation**

The purpose of Gen Lich's visit to India was to further deepen bilateral defence cooperation with India. Underscoring the importance of the visit, Gen Lich was accompanied by a mega 30-member delegation, the largest so far to have accompanied him on a foreign visit, including their Chiefs of the Air Force and the Navy and the Deputy Chief of General Staff.<sup>5</sup>

The possible sale of BrahMos missiles by India to Vietnam that has been on the table for quite some time, again came up for discussion. Vietnam has evinced interest to acquire this weapon system from India and India is committed to strengthen Vietnam's defence capabilities, especially as the security environment in the region has been deteriorating rather rapidly.

Vietnam is involved in a territorial dispute with China over the South China Sea (SCS). India too is engaged in oil exploration activities in the areas of the Sea that Vietnam has claimed and therefore it naturally has a stake to defend its economic interests if these economically lucrative activities come under the threat from an outside power. In principle India has agreed to sell the missiles to Vietnam, over which negotiations are still on. Vietnam is keen to possess these supersonic missiles that can be fired from land, water and under water. India produces this weapon system in partnership with Russia and Russia shall have no objection if India enters into a commercial deal with Vietnam on this.<sup>6</sup>

Other issues that came up for discussion included the much delayed project to train Vietnamese pilots on the Su 30. Hanoi's request to train its pilots of the Russian-built Sukhoi fighter-jets has been hanging fire due to financial constraints and other logistical issues. Vietnam recently acquired 36 Su-30MK2 fighter jets from Russia. Since India operates a large fleet of Su-MKIs, an Indian variant of these, it has considerable expertise, i.e. after Russia, and so, Vietnam was keen that India trains its pilots to operate these newly acquired fighter jets. As expected, Gen Lich's talks with Parrikar discussed this issue at length. Finally, an agreement to train Vietnam's Sukhoi-30 pilots was reached between Gen Lich and Parrikar on 5th December. Though both India and Vietnam operate Russian Su-30 jets, the two countries' models differ slightly in their configuration. India operates over 200 Su-30 MK1 fighters "air dominance jets" and has considerable expertise with the same. Details of the training will be worked out between the two soon. A memorandum of understanding was signed on peace

keeping as well as on an exchange of delegations. Parrikar offered “India’s partnership as a reliable player in terms of transfer of technology and building a local defence industry”. The two defence ministers also discussed the regional situation and took note of their converging interests. The programme for cooperation between the Air Forces also included exchange of experts and repair and maintenance expertise, besides training of pilots. Following the agreement on pilots’ training, Vietnamese pilots will begin arriving in India from early 2017 onwards to get both basic and advanced training on the Sukhoi of the Indian Air Force.<sup>7</sup>

India has announced two lines of credit – \$100 million and \$500 million – for defence purchases. India has also offered 50 slots to Vietnamese defence personnel under the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation programme. Under this strategic partnership, India has already trained 550 Vietnamese submariners to operate nine newly-acquired Russian-built Kilo-attack diesel electric submarines during the past three years. Vietnam began inducting and operating Kilo class submarines since 2014. India already uses several Kilo submarines. Within the rubric of the comprehensive strategic partnership framework, General Lich sought replication of the success of cooperation between the two navies with the Army and Air Force as well. As a strategic partner, India is open to Vietnam’s ideas.

Following the agreement, the defence secretaries of both the countries shall meet soon to identify military projects and equipment under the new \$500 million line of credit announced by Prime Minister Modi during his visit to Vietnam in September 2016.

Even while India was preparing to roll out a red carpet welcome for General Lich on 3rd December to further deepen bilateral military cooperation following the up-gradation of the Strategic Partnership into a Comprehensive level, Vietnam’s ambassador to India, Ton Sinh Thanh was allowed by the Indian Navy to visit the under-construction Indigenous Aircraft Carrier (IAC) being constructed by the Cochin Shipyard Limited. This was a clear indication of the underlying, high level of trust both countries now share on defence matters. There could be a possibility of Vietnam opting for Indian-made aircraft carriers sometime in the near future.

The other important visitor from Vietnam was the Chairwoman of the National Assembly Nguyen Thi Kim Ngan who visited India from 8th to 11<sup>th</sup> December. She and her Indian counterpart Smt. Sumitra Mahajan inked a Memorandum of Understanding, which would expand exchanges of parliament delegation and training programs with a view to push the existing Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between the two countries. It may be recalled that Smt. Mahajan had led an 8-member delegation of parliamentarians to Hanoi to take part in the 132<sup>nd</sup> Assembly of the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU). During the Assembly, two MPs from India were elected unanimously to the Bureau of the First Standing Committee of the IPU on Peace and International Security and the Second Standing Committee of the IPU on Sustainable Development, Finance and Trade, separately. The four-year term of the two MPs on these Committees

ends in 2018. Such visits will further contribute not only to the mutual understanding but will help define new contours in the bilateral Comprehensive Strategic Partnership.

### **Economy and Act East Policy**

With a view to reinvigorate its economic engagement with the ASEAN countries and the larger parts of Asia, the Modi government has broadened the earlier “Look East Policy” and has given it a new candour by naming it “Act East Policy”. In this Indian strategy, Vietnam finds a special place. India is among the top ten trading partners of Vietnam. After the elevation of the Strategic Partnership to a Comprehensive level, the economic component of the relationship now assumes a strategic thrust too. In particular, the key thrust areas where expansion is envisaged are the garment and textile industries, pharmaceuticals, agro-commodities, leather, footwear, and engineering.

Both have agreed to tap into the growing economic opportunities in the region. Both countries can clearly see that enhancing bilateral commercial engagement would complement their strategic objectives and therefore they have agreed to expand trade and business opportunities. Bilateral trade currently stands at \$7.83 billion and both sides are committed to achieve a target of \$15 billion by 2020. With this in view, new sectors and thrust areas were identified to give impetus for enhanced investment.

Indian investments in Vietnam are also on the rise and many Indian companies have registered with almost 23 new projects with a capital outlay of \$139 million in areas such as food processing, fertilizers, auto components, textile accessories, etc. Cooperation in the IT sector also looks promising for both sides. Currently, Indian investments in Vietnam stands at about \$1.1 billion and this is expected to be significantly enhanced when the large infrastructure projects such as Tata Power’s Long Phu-II 1,320 MW thermal power project with an estimated cost of \$2.2 billion is completed. Similarly, India is ready to welcome investment from Vietnam by creating an attractive and investor-friendly climate. In particular, India would be happy to invite Vietnamese entrepreneurs to invest in its North East, a focus area in its ‘Act East Policy’. This is because India is committed to increase connectivity between its Northeast and ASEAN portions and for this purpose, has already allotted a \$1 billion Line of Credit for India-ASEAN physical and digital connectivity.<sup>8</sup>

Besides seeking facilitation of ongoing Indian projects and investments in Vietnam, PM Modi invited several Vietnamese companies to take advantage of the various schemes and flagship programs of the Indian government. PM Modi told his Vietnamese counterpart: “As Vietnam seeks to empower and enrich its people, Modernise its agriculture; Encourage entrepreneurship and innovation; Strengthen its Science and Technology base; Create new institutional capacities for faster economic development; and Take steps to build a modern nation, India and its 1.25 billion people stand ready to be Vietnam’s partner and a friend in this journey.” The framework agreement on space cooperation would allow Vietnam to join hands with the Indian Space Research Organization (ISRO) to meet its national development objectives.

In order to hone and fine tune the cultural synergy, India has established and opened an Indian Cultural Centre in Hanoi. Being cultural partners, the agreement also included archaeological support to Vietnam and the Archaeological Survey of India aims to help Vietnam to start the conservation and restoration work of the Cham monuments at My Son in Vietnam. Seen from a larger perspective, ASEAN as a regional grouping known for demonstration of solidarity and unity, is important to India in terms of its historical links, geographical proximity, cultural ties and the strategic space that both share. India views ASEAN as central to its Act East Policy and Vietnam as the ASEAN Coordinator for India could have a catalytic role in strengthening India-ASEAN partnership across all areas. It was therefore agreed to keep the on-going momentum in the relationship.

While growth in the economic realm is making incremental progress in leaps and bounds, defence cooperation is the most significant pillar in the strategic partnership between the two countries. Indian ships regularly make friendly port calls to Vietnam. For the first time, a Vietnamese Ship participated in the International Fleet Review at Vishakhapatnam, India, in February 2016. The objective of such cooperation between the two Navies is to maintain an order in the sea and a secure maritime commerce, especially from such threats as piracy, terrorism, etc. By engaging with Vietnam at Sea, India also wants to convey a message to its other friendly countries that it is committed to global norms and to promoting peace and stability in the Asia-Pacific region, including the resolution of disputes in the SCS.

There is also a need to have air connectivity between the capitals of the two countries – New Delhi and Hanoi. Though discussions have been held several times, no real headway has been made as the route is argued to be not commercially viable. The state owned Air India is already bleeding and the Indian government seems hamstrung to start direct air connectivity. It is proposed that the government of India could make a start by launching direct air connectivity, by providing subsidy to other airlines. The Air Service Agreement was signed in November 2013 during the visit of Party General Secretary H.E. Mr Nguyen Phu Trong to India. Jet Airways then started the code sharing, direct flight between Ho Chi Minh City and Delhi/Mumbai w.e.f. 5 November 2014. Linking New Delhi and Hanoi is the next logical step. Since 2007, two Indian Banks i.e. Bank of India and Indian Overseas Bank have been operating Representative Offices in Vietnam. Bank of India has already been given the license to open its branch in Ho Chi Minh City, which shall be operational soon.<sup>9</sup> Here again, given the deepening business between the two countries, India's banking presence in Hanoi could be felt soon with far reaching beneficial effects for both countries.

### **South China Sea and Maritime Security**

The South China Sea is a major flashpoint and a moot point of arguments in the Asian region. The sea bed is believed to contain precious oil and gas and many Asian nations make claims to their exclusive economic zones to control such resources, whereas China claims in its entirety and threatens use of force to assert its territorial and maritime claims. This has created a live fire cracker-like situation of unease in the region. In the



wake of Chinese assertiveness in staking claims, the smaller claimant nations are seeking to bolster their defence preparedness as well as solicit support from nations friendly to their cause. The Indo-Vietnam defence cooperation actually needs to be viewed from this perspective.

According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute's (SIPRI) think-tank, which tracks the arm trade over five-year periods, there has been an almost 700 per cent surge in Vietnam's defence procurements as of 2015. Vietnam's quiet military build-up, designed as a deterrent, is aimed to secure its 200 nautical mile Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) in the wake of China's assertive claims in the South China Sea. Therefore, Vietnam is in the market for fighter jets and more advanced missile systems, in addition to its six kilo-class submarines which it has bought from Russia. The 12 agreements signed during Modi's visit covering cyber security, ship-building, UN peace-keeping operations and naval information sharing are in tune with Vietnam's aim to boost its defence capability and India-Vietnam defence cooperation needs to be seen from this perspective.

The significance of the scheduling of PM Modi's visits to three Asian countries cannot be missed or misconstrued as a mere coincidence, since Vietnam was the first destination before he touched down on land in China, because of the differences of opinions of albeit, similar kinds that both India and Vietnam have with China. Besides differences on territorial issues, both India and Vietnam are concerned with China's disrespect to rules-based international order which is contributing to a rising tension in the region.

India has taken a principled stance on the South China Sea and its eastern outreach in the wake of the July 12 declaration of the Permanent Court of Arbitration challenging China's territorial and maritime claims in the South China Sea region needs to be understood in perspective.<sup>10</sup> It was therefore not difficult to discern the growing strategic convergences between the two sides as defence procurement was a major component of the slew of agreements signed. Naval cooperation has too, been progressing smoothly between the two countries.

### **Vietnam's Response to India's Position on the SCS**

Vietnam's response to India's outreach was on expected lines. Vietnam lauded India's principled position on the disputed South China Sea and also sought India's participation in the oil and gas sectors. Communist Party General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong expressed Vietnam's desire to intensify coordination in several regional and international fora and reiterated that India has always stood by staunchly as a friend with Vietnam throughout history and that it is rare to find such a relationship which has lasted almost 2,000 years.

The strategic significance of the South China Sea in terms of large volumes of flow of trade through this critical sea route cannot be understated. This busy waterway is also of very critical importance to India as almost 50 per cent of its trade passes

through this region of the sea. China is involved in a raging dispute with Vietnam, Taiwan, the Philippines, Malaysia and Brunei over ownership of territory in the South China Sea. The world tribunal's ruling on 12<sup>th</sup> July rejected China's claims of having any historical basis of this claimed ownership. Though it looked like a victory for the Philippines, it has made China toughen its stance by saying that the tribunal had no power to adjudicate. China's aggressive stance was further reinforced by the knowledge that the tribunal does not have enforcing authority to its ruling.

The Indian Ocean is now more crucially important than ever and the maritime security issue has become important to many countries in the Asia-Pacific region. Peace and stability in the Indian Ocean is crucial to the economic development of many Asian countries. In particular, one can safely say that China's behavior in the Pacific and Indian Ocean or rather the current stance it has taken on the ongoing disputes in this region has a direct impact on regional geopolitics. As a result, many countries in this region are being forced to readjust their strategic foreign policy to deal with the new situations. In this perspective, the Indo-Vietnam defence cooperation is a critical pillar in this strategic partnership and thus justifies its comprehensive character.

In view of India's "Act East Policy" in which deepening economic engagement with the ASEAN is the primary target and hence the biggest component, it's stakes are equally high. Though India is not a claimant to the South China Sea, its economic interests are exposed to vulnerability due to China's stand and therefore it has to look out to protect them. Apart from its limited direct economic interest, India also cannot overlook the fact that the SCS is an important waterway for its trade and commerce not only with the ASEAN countries but also with Japan, Taiwan, South Korea, including China.

India is thus on the same page as with its Asian partner countries. In principle, India upholds the importance of safeguarding the freedom of navigation of the seas, the right of over-flight and the importance of peaceful settlement of disputes in accordance with the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Seas (UNCLOS). In several joint statements that India has issued with countries such as Vietnam, Japan and the US, India has reiterated this position, citing its own experience of how it had, in the past, accepted the tribunal's verdict relating to its maritime boundary with Bangladesh and therefore expects China to show the same sentiment regarding the verdict of 12 July 2016 relating to the SCS. India strongly believes that states should resolve disputes through peaceful means without threat or use of force and exercise a principled self-restraint in the conduct of activities that could complicate or escalate disputes affecting peace and stability.

For India, it is important that the Code of Conduct related to the SCS should be signed at the earliest when a rules-based order is an absolute must because of China's increasing militarization. Putting it that way, instead of asserting itself as a rising power, China should become a responsible power as is expected of a responsible, permanent member of the Security Council and additionally as a signatory to the UNCLOS. India

## Disputed claims in the South China Sea

### Claims

- China
- Brunei
- Malaysia
- Philippines
- Vietnam



### Area:

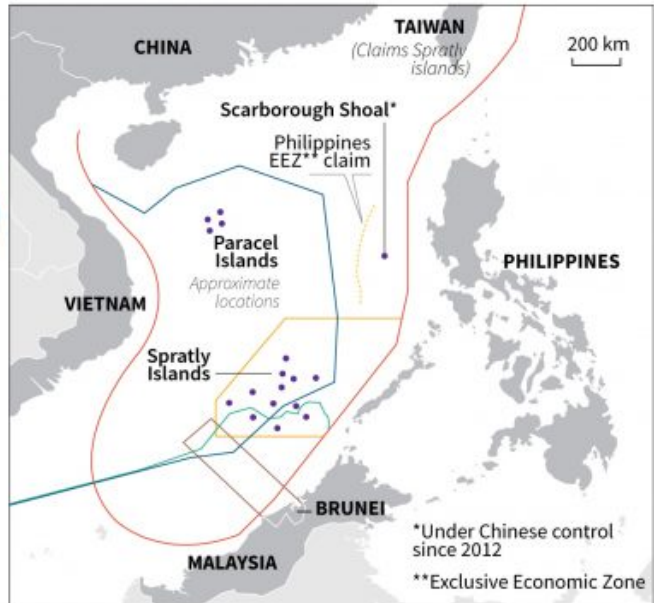
South China Sea covers more than 3 million sq km

### Trade:

Over \$5 trillion in ship-borne trade passes through the sea annually

### Oil and gas:

Major unexploited oil and gas deposits are believed to lie under the seabed



Sources: CSIS/AMTI/D.Rosenberg/MiddleburyCollege/HarvardAsiaQuarterly/Phil gov't/ChinaMaritimeSafetyAdministration

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is just a regional power with benign intent and needs to take into consideration the sensitivities and requirements of other friendly countries in Asia if it wants to play the role of the balancing power and security provider. Such a role shall however help India enhance its regional profile and also contribute towards maintenance of peace and stability in the Asian region.

Indeed, not just Vietnam alone but even the rest of the ASEAN member countries are looking towards India, expecting it to play a greater role towards the peace and stability in the region. At times, China has erroneously interpreted India's position on the South China Sea as if to suggest that India endorses China's position on the South China Sea. In order not to give such undue leeway, India should not feel shy to articulate its position strongly and argue to uphold the UNCLOS as the basis of the legal order of the sea. China rests its arguments by referring to the 2002 Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea, which states that "all related disputes should be addressed through negotiations and agreements between the parties concerned." It has therefore found flaws in Philippines' move to approach the tribunal for arbitration and therefore says it is an invalid move.

India is awakened to the emerging seriousness of the situation because of China's uncompromising attitude and rigid stance and has hence broken its shackles of diplomatic silence to take a strong position by finding common grounds with Vietnam, where its own economic stakes are under threat as it is involved in oil exploration in the sea off Vietnam. Against this background and because of the historical linkages dating back to its Buddhist roots, India and Vietnam have found a commonality of interests, which is

another reason why bilateral ties have expanded between the two nations in all domains – economic, security / defence and even cultural. Apart from exploring the possibility of the sale of BrahMos missiles, India is also helping Vietnam to beef up its capability by capacity building, training and maintenance of equipment and port calls and also holding exercises between the navies of the two countries. India's decision to offer Vietnam a \$100 million loan to purchase Indian-made defence equipment was based on this larger perspective of beefing up Vietnam's defence capabilities.

### **After BrahMos, Now Talks on Akash**

The details of the sale of BrahMos supersonic cruise missiles to Vietnam are still being discussed and are yet to be finalized. The Indian make BrahMos supersonic cruise missiles (the world's fastest) and the new Varunastra advanced heavyweight anti-submarine torpedoes are capable of dealing with China's fleet of Russian-made Kilo-class diesel electric submarines, Before this finalization is even completed, however, there are now talks of India's offer of Akash surface-to-air missile systems to Vietnam and this is unnerving China because it seems to suggest that India and Vietnam are hatching a conspiracy against China. Such an inflammatory Chinese reaction reflects the degree of China's ignorance / inability to appreciate the changing geostrategic dynamics in a region that are constantly changing. Observing the current scenario in the region, it is clear that there is no reason for any country to get paranoid when two other friendly countries are engaged in business and cooperation in other areas. Indo-Vietnam relations should be understood from this larger perspective.<sup>11</sup> For record, the submarine force of the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) operates 12 Kilo-class subs. The Indian Navy operates 10 of these submarines while the Vietnam People's Navy has an inventory of only six Kilos. This disparity alone should put all Chinese fears in this respect to rest.

The discussion on the possible sale of Akash missiles too comes up in the backdrop of both the countries deciding to "elevate" their "strategic partnership". The missiles have an interception range of 25-km against hostile aircraft, helicopters and drones. The significance of the timing of this discussion is important because both India and Vietnam are strengthening bilateral military ties keeping China's confrontationist attitude in mind. While Vietnam is facing an increase in Chinese incursions into Vietnamese waters in areas of the South China Sea that it claims as its own, India has a completely different sort of issue with China; this besides remaining concerned about China's aggressive and uncalled for advances in the South China Sea.

India is very serious about joining the 48-nation Nuclear Suppliers Group and it launched a diplomatic offensive in this respect but China thwarted India's bid. China has also come in the way of getting the Jaish-e-Muhammed chief, Masood Azhar designated a terrorist by the UN. It has also stepped up its naval forays into the Indian Ocean Region. These all constitute enough rationale for India to fast track expanding "strategic and military partnerships" with friendly countries like Japan and Vietnam.

Initial reports had suggested that Vietnam has shown “deep interest” in the acquisition of Akash missiles, and negotiating for transfer of technology and joint production of the air defence system.<sup>12</sup> From the Indian point of view, rushing into the whole gamut that includes not only sale but production issues may not be appropriate. India prefers that talks on such a serious matter ought to move incrementally, beginning with off-the-shelf purchase and to be subsequently followed by transfer of technology, maintenance and other related issues. Compared to the BrahMos, sale of the Akash missile system would be far easier because the system is 96 per cent indigenous. It was developed by Bharat Dynamics Limited, a 47-year-old company under the control of India’s Ministry of Defence. The defence secretaries of the two countries are expected to meet soon to identify the military projects and equipment under the new \$500 million defence credit line announced by Modi during his visit to Hanoi. Compared to the Akash missile, the 290-km BrahMos missiles are Indo-Russian joint venture products, with over 60% of the components still being imported from Russia, (though Russia does not have any objection if India enters into a deal on this with Vietnam).

What makes the Akash and BrahMos sale issues significant in Indo-Vietnamese ties? The obvious reason is the common concern about China’s intentions. Besides, both India and Vietnam have bilateral issues with China, the common worry being China’s forays into the South China Sea where it has built several bases and is outrageously defying world opinion on the matter, including the verdict of the international tribunal’s ruling of 12 July 2016 which rejected China’s claims as having no legal basis. It seems therefore logical that the adversarial nations come together and share their strength to cope with China’s belligerence and increasing military clout. India’s approach towards this issue is not recent; the predecessor government of Manmohan Singh started this and the current Modi government has just given a push and new thrust to the bilateral bonhomie.

What impact would the Akash missile have on Vietnam’s defence capabilities if the deal between India and Vietnam is finalized and is done? Firstly, it would deter China from taking any pre-emptive strikes for fear of massive retaliation (a kind of a regulatory stop on China’s offensive belligerence on the SCS issue). Besides the Russian-made Kilo-class submarines (noted for their extreme quietness which complicates detection) in possession with Vietnam’s Navy and the necessary training of Vietnamese submariners by the Indian Navy, Akash should prove an invaluable asset to the air defence efforts of the Vietnam People’s Army. The missile has the capacity to destroy aerial targets like fighter jets, cruise missiles and air-to-surface missiles as well as ballistic missiles up to a 30 km distant flying target at an altitude of 18,000 meters. Akash with its killer feature of being able to destroy multiple aerial targets streaking in from different directions at the same time has been in operational service with the Indian Army and the Indian Air Force. “An Akash missile regiment has six launchers with three missiles each. The complete system consists of surveillance and tracking radars; control centers and ground support systems. This all-weather missile system can work from both static and mobile platforms.”<sup>13</sup>

## China's Reaction

China's reaction, as can be expected was not very kind in response to India extending help to Vietnam on the defense front. Chinese media made observations that PM Modi's Vietnam visit was aimed more at putting pressure on China and to raise their "bargaining chips", so as to speak, rather than just a friendly visit to Vietnam. The state-run *Global Times* even went as far as commenting that, at a time, when the negative emotions towards China among the Vietnamese people are on the rise, because of festering tensions over South China Sea, India siding with Vietnam and upgrading their strategic partnership is just trying to upscale the bargaining position to "pile pressure on Beijing".<sup>14</sup>

The paper further commented that both "New Delhi and Hanoi wish to raise their bargaining position whilst having interactions with China, but neither of them wants any direct confrontations with Beijing". It further said that such a possibility cannot be totally excluded, but it will not play a vital role either. It was critical of India by observing that India is always cautious in dealing with China for fear of escalation and allowing the US to be used indirectly in the latter's rebalance to the Asia-Pacific strategy without the US openly admitting it. What the report basically meant was that there seems to be a hidden strategy or agenda between India and the US when dealing with China and India was using Vietnam as the proverbial cog in this larger wheel. It dismissed the view that if the US and Japan, with their strong support could not succeed in piling pressure on Beijing, it was completely unrealistic of Vietnam to garner India's support to deal with its differences with Beijing. China views the growing Indo-Vietnam bonhomie and strategic bonding to have only limited influence on China.

Being alarmed, Chinese media warned India not to "stir up troubles" in the regions of Southeast Asia by deepening defence ties with Vietnam. An op-ed in *Global Times* had made public observations that China would not sit quietly if India "genuinely treats its enhancement of military relations with Vietnam as a strategic arrangement or even revenge against Beijing". Chinese media further went on to make observations that the Indo-Vietnamese defence deal is not just a normal arms sale but they are interpreting it more as a response to counter the Chinese threat. While acknowledging that New Delhi deepening ties with Hanoi may be in tune with India's Act East Policy, it cautioned that "ties should be built for the sake of peace and stability in the region, rather than stirring up troubles or anxiety for others". China accuses India of exploiting geopolitical factors, which is why some nations have been cozying up to India over the years. China also finds fault with the Indian media for describing Vietnam as China's backyard.

The talks on the possible sale of BrahMos and Akash missiles demonstrate the growing relationship between New Delhi and Hanoi as it offers strategic advantage to both sides. Regrettably, China does not see it that way. The talk on arms sale is consistent with India's ambition to be a major arms supplier. China, which has emerged as a major arms seller, however does not want to allow another Asian nation to enter into the competition.<sup>15</sup> This is one of the major reasons why Beijing has been objecting to India's entry into the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG), which has the potential of

enlarging India's nuclear industry. On its part, Vietnam has been steadily building up its military capabilities over the past decade in view of growing tensions in the hotly contested South China Sea. In May 2016, when the Obama administration decided to lift its long-held arms embargo against Vietnam, Beijing reacted with barely masked irritation. Beijing usually tends to react and not very favourably when such defence deals with two friendly nations in Asia take place.

When the Vietnamese leader Nguyen Phu Trong made a visit to China in January 2017, Beijing protested on Vietnam's arms deal with India.<sup>16</sup> While Beijing is objecting so strongly to the arms deal between India and Vietnam, paradoxically, it has itself been arming Pakistan with really sophisticated military equipment, which has no other reason to accumulate arms other than planning to use them against India. Vietnam unlike Pakistan, does not want a conflict with China over South China Sea and therefore Trong traveled to Beijing to discuss on any and every means of finding some solution acceptable to others and in accordance with the rules of law governing global commerce.

Is India then risking Chinese ire by trying to sell BrahMos and Akash missile systems to Vietnam? The arms sale talk need not be seen in any other way other than a business deal between two friendly countries. After all both India and Vietnam share a friendly history and have long maintained mutually satisfying economic relations by trade and investment cooperation. But the missile sale, which may be designed to guard against an aggressive China, signals just how quickly it is becoming one of the region's stronger partnerships.

Murray Hiebert, deputy director of the Southeast Asia programme at the Centre for Strategic and International Studies in Washington observes that "Vietnam knows it can never stand up to China, but it figures it can inflict more damage to China and perhaps even regulate China's pre-emptive forays in the SCS, if it bolsters its weapons hardware a bit more. And India, with its long-time strong relations with Vietnam, is a very willing partner". That is the rationale behind the deal, observes Hiebert. Both share strategic concerns over China and want to see an early resolution to the South China Sea sovereignty disputes. India's ONGC is engaged in oil exploration operations in Vietnam-claimed areas of the sea and therefore also has another stake to guard its economic interests as well.

Besides having 'civilizational' links, it needs to be remembered that Indo-Vietnamese bonhomie dates back to the days of Ho Chi Minh and Jawaharlal Nehru. India was the only non-Soviet country to recognize Vietnam's regime in Cambodia. The strategic convergence of interests in the present times makes India a willing partner and the arms sale should be seen mainly from this perspective. India has the ambition to become a weapon exporting country from a weapon importing country with a target of generating atleast \$2 billion revenue in the coming years from this source. India is thus keen to have a place in the global defence market. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, Vietnam was the world's eighth largest weapons importer in 2011-2015 and therefore India also finds Vietnam as a keen arms customer.

Earlier, the State-controlled *Global Times* had noted that Indo-Vietnamese relations were never a concern for China, the trade ties and oil exploration activities notwithstanding. But Beijing clearly cannot digest an arms deal between India and Vietnam as it sees as a concern.

### **Concluding Observations**

The discussion above demonstrates very clearly that with the elevation of the existing strategic partnership between India and Vietnam to a “comprehensive” level, the security and defence relationships and the talks on arms sales (BrahMos and Akash missile systems) have started assuming greater depth and intensity. This institutionalization could look recent in the journey of relationships, but in reality, the Indo-Vietnamese relationship is not at all recent and in fact spans two millennia of contacts between the two civilizations. The influence of Buddhism and the remnants of the Hindu Cham civilization stand testimony to the long-tested relationship. It has merely acquired robustness in recent times. PM Modi’s visit in September 2016 further contributes to this narrative. There could be no different opinion when Vietnamese Prime Minister Pham Van Dong described the Indo-Vietnamese relationship as: “as pure as a cloudless sky”.

Therefore, besides being in accordance with the rubric of India’s “Act East Policy”, deepening ties with Vietnam would mostly contribute to promote peace and stability in the region. Indeed, Vietnam can be a critical player in the global production chain within the ASEAN and this complements India’s strategy of “Act East Policy”. Furthermore, through Vietnam, India can seek to project its core national interest and articulate its strategic outlook in the Indo-Pacific region. Both countries have shown equal interest in addressing each other’s concerns. India, on its part, has always considered Hanoi to be an important pillar in its Look and Act East policy. Both are committed to take this relationship on an upward trajectory to the next possible higher level.

The “Act East Policy” has outlined India as a responsible stake holder in the region and Vietnam is the most important anchor for this strategy. In this perspective, the two visits of the two senior leaders of Vietnam to India following PM Modi’s visit to Hanoi are significant, and will further help define new contours in the bilateral Comprehensive Strategic Partnership whilst exploring potentials in strategic, defence and trade cooperation, among others. It may be noted that it is not only India that backs the principle of rule of law in the SCS to stabilize the area, Japan too is committed to boost the maritime security capabilities of the ASEAN member countries. So, there is an enormous scope for India, Vietnam and Japan to come together within a trilateral framework to explore an understanding in forging strategic, defence and trade cooperation for peace, stability and prosperity in the Asia-Pacific region at large.

Going by the historical narrative that complements the current priorities of India’s engagement strategy, India values Vietnam as an old friend and a member of the ASEAN



grouping and a very important pillar in its Act East Policy. Being the ASEAN Coordinator for India for 2015-18, Vietnam is committed to strengthen its bilateral relationship with India within the Indo-ASEAN and Mekong-Ganga Cooperation framework. The year 2017 should mark a significant milestone as India and Vietnam celebrate the 45<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations and 10 years of strategic partnership. Both have plans to organize various events throughout the year to commemorate the events. The prognosis for the future in India-Vietnam relationship thus looks extremely promising.

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### Notes

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