

India-Vietnam: Strengthening the Strategic Partnership

P K CHAKRAVORTY

Introduction

Vietnam lies in the Asia-Pacific region and is a strategic partner of India. Vietnam and India have China as a neighbour which results in commonality of strategic thinking due to the complexities in dealing with the Chinese nationalistic aspirations. The United States (US), on account of the significant rise in China's military power, is possibly rebalancing its forces in the region. Apart from this, the US preaches freedom of navigation in this area against Chinese maritime claims in the East China Sea and South China Sea. The East China Sea disputes are with Japan and the South China Sea disputes are with Vietnam, Philippines, Taiwan, Malaysia and Brunei. While China has an unsettled land border with India, what surprised India was China's objection to drilling for oil by the Oil and Natural Gas Corporation (ONGC) Videsh in oil blocks donated by Vietnam. India rightly stated its right to undertake commercial activities in international waters. This bold step by the Indian and Vietnamese governments led to China's silence on this issue. After a decade of being strategic partners, India and Vietnam have formally upgraded their relationship status to comprehensive strategic partnership.¹

Strategic Friendship

India and Vietnam enjoy strong bilateral relations. Their friendship dates back to the Cham Kingdom in the 2nd century, Before Common Era (BCE).² In the Cold War era, India continued to have cordial relations with Vietnam. There was a convergence of strategic interests which resulted in mutual cooperation between the two countries. After the unification of Vietnam in 1975, India backed Vietnam's Cambodia initiative and extended support against China's offensive of 1979. This was a major step and led to India souring its relations with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). India assisted Vietnam economically and signed the Most Favoured Nation (MFN) agreement with it on December 18, 1982.

The dissolution of the Soviet Union in December 1991 impacted both countries. The period that followed witnessed Vietnam becoming a part of ASEAN and India launched its Look East policy (currently known as the Act East policy) which ushered in a new era of cooperation between India and the Southeast Asian countries. During this period, economic relations further strengthened between India and Vietnam. The key areas included capacity building, technical assistance and information sharing to ensure the security of the vital Sea Lanes of Communication (SLOCs), including piracy and rescue at sea.³

The China Factor

In the post Cold War period, China played an active role in Southeast Asia. It is interesting to note that prior to the unification of Vietnam, the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) had captured the Paracel Islands in 1974. Further, Vietnam invaded the Chinese supported Khmer Rouge government in January 1978, overthrowing the dictatorial rulers and this hurt the Chinese. On February 17, 1979, China launched an offensive on the northern borders of Vietnam to teach the Vietnamese a lesson. The conflict lasted up to March 06, 1979, with no major gains being made by the Chinese, despite the fact that a large part of the Vietnamese Army was in Cambodia.⁴

China has peacefully resolved the land border issue and the maritime border issue in the Gulf of Tonkin.⁵ However, the dispute over the Paracel and Spratly Islands remains unresolved. India has been allotted oil blocks by Vietnam in the South China Sea. China has cautioned India on the subject but India has taken a bold step in stating that commercial activity will continue in the international waters.

India's strong strategic relationship with Vietnam can be an effective counter against growing Chinese assertiveness.

In the meantime, the Philippines took the South China Sea issue to the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) in The Hague. On July 12, 2016, the PCA promulgated the award. The PCA considered the implications of China's nine-dash line and whether China has historic rights to resources in the South China Sea beyond the limits of the maritime zones that it is entitled to in consonance with the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Seas (UNCLOS). The tribunal concluded that the nine dash line did not give China exclusive rights in the high seas.⁶ China was perturbed with the award and refused to comply with the PCA ruling. India and Vietnam have both stated they respect UNCLOS and freedom of navigation on the high seas.

China reacted very strongly to the verdict. Chinese President Xi Jinping said China's territorial sovereignty and marine rights in the seas would not be affected by the ruling, which had declared large areas of the sea to be neutral international waters or the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) of other countries. The ruling by the PCA certainly comprised loss of face for China. However, it is pertinent to note that the PCA lacks enforcement capability. China currently continues its land reclamation and construction efforts in the Spratly Islands. Currently, 3,200 acres of land have been reclaimed in the seven features that China occupies. This would allow China to maintain a more sustained presence in the area. China has already threatened to establish an Aircraft Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ) which could be utilised for ensuring air dominance over the area. None of the claimants have the capability of enforcing the ruling and they have to diplomatically deal with China.

Strengthening of Strategic Partnership

India and Vietnam enjoy strong strategic relations which emerged with the First Memorandum of Understanding on Defence being signed in 1994, the formal Defence Protocol in 2000, and the Strategic Partnership in 2007. Since then, we have had an annual Strategic Defence Dialogue, with the Indian Defence Secretary representing India. Considering the intensity of our relations, the upgradation of these talks to the ministerial levels would be greatly beneficial. This is currently under active consideration.

Numerous visits have taken place by top leaders of both countries. Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited Vietnam from September 02-03, 2016. The visit to Vietnam was the first by an Indian Prime Minister after 15 years. Twelve

agreements were signed during the visit, including on outer space, UN peace-keeping, avoidance of double taxation, cyber security, information technology, information on white shipping and a contract for the procurement of Offshore Patrol Vessels (OPVs).⁷

Increasing bilateral cooperation between India and Vietnam will strengthen the comprehensive strategic partnership.

Further based on the strong relations which have been vindicated during the last 45 years of diplomatic relations and 10 years of strategic partnership, both countries agreed to elevate their current level of strategic partnership to a higher pedestal. The relationship would be upgraded to the level of comprehensive strategic partnership which Vietnam currently enjoys with Russia and China. This is pertinent as it gives an official stamp to our mutual trust, exhibited in our training and day-to-day dealings. With regards to the defence issue, there is no doubt that both countries respect the current Permanent Court of Arbitration ruling and agree on freedom of navigation on the high seas. To further strengthen our defence relationship, Prime Minister Modi has extended a \$ 500 million line of credit for purchase of defence equipment. The equipment to be procured is not known but there is a high probability it could comprise frigates, submarines or the BrahMos missile. During the visit, the Vietnamese side signed a contract with L&T for the purchase of four OPVs. In addition, Prime Minister Modi announced a grant of \$ 5 million for the construction of an Army Software Park at the Tele Communications University in Nha Trang. Further, to assist surveillance, there will be cooperation in downloading images from outer space to provide real-time pictures of activities in Vietnam's area of interest.

Economics is directly related to strategic relations. Enhancing bilateral economic engagement is a strategic objective. Both countries are committed to doing their utmost to increase the bilateral trade to \$ 15 billion by 2020. This would need immense efforts but can be achieved if both countries enhance their business interactions and diversify the range of their commercial activities. Further, there must be increased two-way investment, especially by private investors of both countries. Prime Minister Modi, especially, has sought contractual facilitation of Tata's Soc Tranh 1,320 Mega Watt (MW) plant at the earliest. Both countries would do their best to enhance exploration of oil and gas in the new blocks allotted for exploration. Connectivity between both countries needs to be optimised. There is a need for direct non-stop flights, dedicated

shipping and land connectivity to be optimised. This would automatically strengthen economic relations between the two countries.

It is indeed creditable that both countries exhibit the highest degree of cooperation in regional and international fora. India is grateful to Vietnam for consistently supporting its candidature for a permanent seat in the reformed Security Council. It has been decided that India would support Vietnam's candidature for a non-permanent seat for the term 2020-21 and Vietnam would similarly support India's candidature for the same in 2021-22. Overall, India-Vietnam relations moved to a higher trajectory during the Prime Minister's visit.

It is of interest to note that Admiral Sunil Lamba, Chairman, Chiefs of Staff Committee and Chief of the Naval Staff, visited Vietnam from October 04 to 07, 2017. His visit enabled interactions with dignitaries and enhancing cooperation between the armed forces of the two countries.

Way Ahead

India and Vietnam enjoy strong strategic relations which emerged as indicated with the First Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on defence being signed in 1994, the formal Defence Protocol in 2000 and the Strategic Partnership in 2007. Our former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee understood this aspect thoroughly. Ever since, we have had an annual Strategic Defence Dialogue, with the Indian Defence Secretary representing India. Considering the intensity of our relations, the upgradation of these talks to the ministerial levels is likely to commence.

Cam Ranh Bay has been often described as one of the jewels of Vietnam. The long protective seaward peninsula, and the natural inner and outer harbours form what many believe to be possibly the best deep water port sea port facility in the entire world. There is also an Air Force base, with excellent runways for state-of-the-art aircraft. The use of these facilities by the Indian Navy and Indian Air Force would help to strengthen our strategic partnership and enable us to undertake actions to protect our assets in the South China Sea. The area is being quietly considered between the two countries.

Based on Vietnam's requirements, India could provide Dornier surveillance aircraft, mini Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs), upgraded T-72 tanks and indigenously manufactured artillery equipment once the same has passed the trials, and a few of the old ships of the Indian Navy. Vietnam is impressed with our missile development and is keen to purchase our supersonic cruise missile, the BrahMos, which can be used on land and sea. The issue merits serious consideration as there are no objections from the foreign joint developer.

Vietnam is also keen that the opportunity be accorded to train its scientists in missile technology and the operation of nuclear reactors.

Vietnam admires the professional training of our armed forces and looks forward to assistance in training in the following areas:

- Conversion training for Su-30 pilots of the People's Vietnam Air Force by the Indian Air Force.
- Submarine crew training of the People's Vietnam Navy by the Indian Navy.
- Training in counter-insurgency and jungle warfare with the Indian Army.
- Training in the English language.

Vietnam would like to cooperate in the field of training as also gaining knowledge in the field of rocketry and missiles. It would be in our interest to cultivate Vietnam and cooperate in strategic aspects, in order to dissuade China from undertaking any misadventure. Vietnam is looking for cooperation in the area of outer space with India. It has already launched two satellites and is planning to develop its own navigation satellites. Cooperation with India would be mutually beneficial to both countries. India is also setting up receiving stations to enable Vietnam to receive downloads from our reconnaissance satellites on the areas bound by the South China Sea.

The new Administration in the United States and its withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) of which Vietnam is a member, has created ambivalence regarding the United States' concern for the Southeast and Southern Asian regions. Both India and Vietnam are closely observing the situation, and would act responsibly with regards to the direction which the United States adopts with respect to the region. It is heartening to see the contents of the joint statement between the President of the United States and the Prime Minister of Japan in their recently conducted deliberations. In the statement, the United States has reaffirmed its support to Japan which is a welcome development.⁸ It is also pertinent to note that President Donald Trump of the United States attended the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) meeting at Danang on November 10 and 11, 2017. Though the United States has decided to leave the TPP, Trump has promised to maintain active economic interest in the region. Further, the TPP appears to have been resurrected, less the United States, and President Trump has termed the Asia-Pacific region as the India-Pacific region which clearly indicates India's importance in the region. Whatever be the course adopted by the United States, India and Vietnam must remain steadfast on their current relationship and take steps for its further intensification. Both countries must have greater strategic interactions to constantly comprehend the dynamics of the region to undertake appropriate responses.

Conclusion

Vietnam, along with Japan, forms the two pillars of India's Act East policy. Partnership in the strategic domain is important to counter China's growing assertiveness. The Government of India is accelerating measures to further strengthen the bonds of friendship between India and Vietnam. This would lead to better stability in the India-Pacific region. It is of interest to note that during US President Barrack Obama's visit to India as the chief guest at the Republic Day celebrations in January 2015, Prime Minister Modi had said, "For too long, India and the US have looked at each other across Europe and the Atlantic. When I look towards the East, I see the Western shores of the United States."⁹ This statement clearly underlines the present government's vision of the Act East policy. The policy, which was originally conceived as an economic initiative, has gained political, strategic and cultural dimensions, including the establishment of institutional mechanisms for dialogue and cooperation.

The elevation of relations to a comprehensive strategic partnership between the two countries is a clear indication of the goodwill, trust and importance the two countries place on this relationship. The partnership between the two countries is extremely vibrant and dynamic. However, to fully realise the potential, a lot more needs to be done. Both countries are committed to enhance the two-way trade to \$ 15 billion. Defence is an extremely important component of the relationship. The new line of credit for \$ 500 million will facilitate deeper defence industry cooperation. The bilateral defence cooperation includes exchanges of high level visits, annual high level dialogues, Service-to-Service cooperation, naval ship visits, training, defence equipment procurement and related transfer of technology.

It is indeed heartening to note the maturity with which the strategic relationship has developed, with both countries understanding the geopolitical compulsions of the region. With greater interaction, both countries are bound to deepen their friendship, resulting in peace and stability for the Indo Pacific region.

Maj Gen **PK Chakravorty** (Retd) is an avid contributor to CLAWS. The views expressed are personal.

Notes

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