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Feasibility of Japan-India-Vietnam Defence Trilateral?

Gitanjali Sinha Roy

Field Marshal Sam Hormusji Framji Jamshedji Manekshaw, better known as Sam “Bahadur”, was the 8th Chief of the Army Staff (COAS). It was under his command that the Indian forces achieved a spectacular victory in the Indo-Pakistan War of 1971. Starting from 1932, when he joined the first batch at the Indian Military Academy (IMA), his distinguished military career spanned over four decades and five wars, including World War II. He was the first of only two Field Marshals in the Indian Army. Sam Manekshaw’s contributions to the Indian Army are legendary. He was a soldier’s soldier and a General’s General. He was outspoken and stood by his convictions. He was immensely popular within the Services and among civilians of all ages. Boyish charm, wit and humour were other notable qualities of independent India’s best known soldier. Apart from hardcore military affairs, the Field Marshal took immense interest in strategic studies and national security issues. Owing to this unique blend of qualities, a grateful nation honoured him with the Padma Bhushan and Padma Vibhushan in 1968 and 1972 respectively.



Photographs courtesy: The Manekshaw family/FORCE

Field Marshal SHFJ Manekshaw, MC
1914-2008

CLAWS Occasional Papers are dedicated to the memory of Field Marshal Sam Manekshaw

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Feasibility of Japan-India-Vietnam Defence Trilateral?

On October 19, 2020, the new Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga embarked on his first overseas visit to Vietnam. The choice to visit Vietnam as his first foreign destination has reflected his desire to continue a Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy in the light of China's aggressive-cum-expansionist behaviour in the region. On his visit to Vietnam, Prime Minister Suga described Vietnam as one of the cornerstones in the free and open Indo-Pacific region. Vietnam, on the other hand, has vowed to continue its efforts in Japan's contribution towards proactive diplomacy—emphasising peace and prosperity in the regional issues of the East China Sea and the South China Sea. Both the countries have agreed in principle and reached a consensus for a military pact which would enable Japan to export defence equipment and technology to Vietnam. Japan has also agreed to help Vietnam in their surveillance capabilities in the South China Sea where it is engaged in a territorial as well as maritime dispute with China. Notably, this is a major leap towards the strengthening of defence and strategic ties between Japan and Vietnam. The cementing of stronger relations between Vietnam and Japan would inevitably facilitate the inclusion of India as a third partner in the defence trilateral eventually. The assumption to include India lies in the fact that Japan is an 'all-weather friend' of New Delhi and, with Vietnam, India has been elevating its relations to defence and strategic levels. This paper aims to delve into this aspect of the Japan-India-Vietnam defence trilateral relations and the various domains for cooperation and collaboration.

Section I: Japan's Vision towards Vietnam

According to Japan's 2019 Defense White Paper, "Vietnam faces multiple and complex security issues like the South China Sea which has a serious impact in the realm of maritime affairs of Vietnam and non-traditional threats like piracy and terrorism". Therefore, keeping these challenges in mind, "Vietnam being a marine country needs to work on a set of policies for a strong national construction, defence, the modernisation of military forces and law enforcement at seas as well as ensure the capable handling of the sea situations, maritime independence, sovereignty, sovereign rights, jurisdiction and national interests at sea".¹

Furthermore, as per Japan's Foreign Policy, Vietnam is one of the important Southeast Asian nations for Japan since 2005. Japan sees Vietnam as a vital partner for its economic growth and for its geostrategic value as a strategic and maritime power, and for these reasons, Vietnam emerges as one of the most reliable partners in this region. Since 2013, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has, during his tenure, made his first overseas visit to Vietnam and carried out several efforts to strengthen the relations between Japan and Vietnam and opined that "Vietnam was an important partner for Japan with shared regional challenges and a mutually complementary economic relationship and worked to advance their 'Strategic Partnership' to strengthen cooperation and together ensure peace and prosperity in the Asia-Pacific and later on, it was further extended to the Indo-Pacific".²

Section II: The China Factor

Vietnam was facing difficulty with China as it had made claims in the South China Sea since January 2005. The firing of Chinese ships at Vietnamese fishing boats created a situation of tension between Vietnam and China in January 2005. Initially, Vietnam remained silent but as the number of such incidents increased, Vietnam lost patience and decided to actively pursue its fight against Chinese aggressiveness and expansionism in the South China Sea. By 2011, the number of attacks by Chinese increased in the Vietnamese waters. On June 9, 2011, a Norwegian-flagged seismic conducting ship that was hired by Vietnam Oil and Gas Corporation clashed with three Chinese fishery patrol vessels, all within Vietnam's Exclusive Economic Zone; Vietnam also claimed that its exploration cables were deliberately cut.³ Pham Phuong Nga, a Vietnamese spokeswoman, opined that "China's systematic action is aimed at turning the undisputed area belonging to Vietnam into an area under dispute in order to materialize China's nine-dotted line claim in the East Sea. This is unacceptable." This statement was a clear giveaway that Vietnam was indeed annoyed with Chinese aggressiveness and expansionism and wasn't ready to take China's arm-twisting and bullying. The Philippines was yet another Southeast Asian country facing similar arm-twisting and bullying from China since 2011 as, on February 25, 2011, Chinese frigate Dongguan had fired three shots at Philippine fishing boats.⁴ It was clear that China, since 2011, had gained the confidence of being a bully towards the South Asian nations and this was a major concern for Vietnam and the Philippines.

The 2019 Vietnam Defence White Paper (DWP) clearly spoke about the fear that Vietnam has of Chinese encroachment and mentioned about "the destabilizing elements in the region which threaten regional stability, peace and prosperity are the disputes in the South China Sea, referred to in Vietnam as the

East Sea”.⁵ Further, the White Paper mentioned that “new developments in the East Sea like the unilateral actions, power-based coercion, violation of international law, militarization, change in the status quo and infringement upon Vietnam’s sovereignty, sovereign rights and jurisdiction as provided in international law have undermined the interests of nations concerned and threatened peace, stability, security, safety, freedom of navigation and overflight in the region”,⁶ and all these activities have been done by China. Vietnam’s Defence White Paper hasn’t mentioned China’s name but all these clearly pointed in the direction of China. In fact, on May 11, 2014, hundreds of people across Vietnam had protested opposite the Chinese embassy against China’s role in the South China Sea and these demonstrations were done in order to communicate the anger that the Vietnamese had against China’s aggressive infringement of Vietnamese sovereignty.⁷ Therefore, it can be said that Vietnam indirectly has been detesting Chinese maritime aggressiveness and expansionism in the East China Sea and South China Sea and has been putting across their annoyance towards Chinese aggression and expansionism.

China’s economic rise was already a concern for Japan since 2010 as China had overtaken Japan to become the world’s second most economically powerful country. In September 2010, Senkaku boat collision incident took place where a Chinese trawler *Minjinyu 5179*, which was operating in the disputed waters near the Senkaku Islands, collided with the Japanese Coast Guard’s patrol boats, and this further aggravated Japan’s concerns over Chinese intentions.⁸ This brought out the need for Japan to defend its interests in the face of a rising China. Therefore, the cumulative aggressiveness of China in 2011 made Japan rethink its different ways to tackle China. Former Japanese Prime Minister’s Cabinet in 2013 increased the country’s defence budget for the first time in eleven years to US\$ 51.7 billion and this led to a 1.9 per cent hike in the Japanese Coast Guard budget. All this was done in order to improve Japanese maritime capabilities and monitor the Senkaku islands in the East China Sea.⁹

Thus, Japan and Vietnam together aims for a common goal of protecting their sovereignty and territorial integrity from China. Vietnam has been worried about China’s moves in the South China Sea and has requested Japan for their help, and so, keeping this request in mind, in August 2014, six used vessels were donated to Vietnam to help strengthen their maritime safety.

Section III: Evaluating Japan-Vietnam Defence Partnership

The region of Southeast Asia occupies a strategic position as it lies in the heart of the trading routes linking the Pacific Ocean and the Indian Ocean. The Strait of Malacca is one of the predominant centres of trade and

exchange, and China has always wanted to grab and create its supremacy in this strait. In order to do so, China would also have to gain control of the South China Sea which would then be a free-flowing trading route for China. Geostrategically, the location of the Strait of Malacca and the South China Sea is also home to many Southeast Asian countries and China's dominance in these two region will directly threaten the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Southeast Asian nations. According to Japan's Defence Policy, the Southeast Asian nations are aware that the region has several destabilising factors like territorial disputes in the South China Sea, ethnic minority issues, separatist and independence movements and the Islamic extremists' groups. Along with this, there have been issues of piracy which affects the free passage for the ships. In order to deal with such issues, the Japanese believe that the Southeast Asian nations have been working to build and strengthen their military forces for national defence, maintain domestic public security and address new security issues like terrorism and piracy. Apart from this, these nations have been working on economic development and have been modernising their military forces, especially naval and air force, and also strengthening their maritime law enforcement capabilities.¹⁰

In fact, in 2009, Vietnam had released its Defence White Paper titled *Vietnam National Defence* which stated that there were risks of conflicts that the Southeast Asian region faced especially due to the increase in complex territorial disputes over land as well as sea, particularly in the domain of territorial sovereignty and associated maritime claims in the South China Sea.¹¹ Further, this document spoke about the gradual modernisation and enhancement of the defence potential only to maintain sufficient military power in order to be able to have self-defence capability.¹² Vietnam reaffirmed neither joining any military alliances or giving any other countries permission to have military bases on its soil, but it did promote defence cooperation with countries that shared their goal of peace, prosperity, independence and development.¹³ Vietnam's DWP 2009 also stated that "defence cooperation is one of the most important factors for maintaining peace and stability in the region and around the world, and it is also an important factor for achieving Vietnam's defence goals."¹⁴ Apart from this, Vietnam had been strengthening its defence capacity through maritime power and has included submarines, frigates, fast attack corvettes, Su-30 MK multirole aircraft, surveillance aircraft and coastal missile defences—all being added to Vietnam's Navy and Air Force.¹⁵ Also, according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), for the time period from 2011 to 2015, Vietnam was the world's eighth largest defence importer. Navy ships and submarines had accounted for 53 per cent of Vietnam's arms acquisition.¹⁶ Vietnam has also

invested in and is modernising their national defence industry so as to improve defence self-help capacity, especially focusing on construction and assembly of naval and law enforcement vessels. It also includes the construction of Molnya Class fast attack missile boats in Vietnam and the domestically built multirole cutters capable of carrying helicopters.¹⁷ Furthermore, *Dự Thảo Báo Cáo Chính Trị trình Đại Hội XII của Đảng* (Political Report to the 12th National Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam) in January 2016 emphasised the “maritime and territorial disputes in the South China Sea region and opined that this region would be intense and complex and so, Vietnam’s defence force will be gradually modernized.”¹⁸

From the above-mentioned documents, it is important to comprehend that Vietnam does understand that in the future, the South China Sea dispute would definitely become intense and complex and therefore, Vietnam gradually started to modernise its defence force. Further, it also needs to be seen in perspective that the only country which is aggressive in the South China Sea is China, and so, inevitably, it does mean that Vietnam is very well aware of the China threat factor. China, being a rising maritime power, has been building military bases and expanding in the South China Sea, and especially occupying the majority features in the Spratly Islands. The reason for China to be aggressive towards Vietnam is because “Vietnam stands in the way of China’s southward movement”¹⁹ but it needs to be understood that Vietnam with its unresolved territorial and maritime disputes with China will never be passively pulled into China’s orbit.²⁰ Though Vietnam desires to not fall into China’s orbit, Vietnam also realises that its naval capability can’t match the major powers and the only other safe option for partnership that Vietnam has with regard to the territorial sovereignty of the South China Sea is Japan.

Japan imports 60 per cent of its oil and this oil transits the South China Sea and so the preservation of the sea lanes of trade and communication need to be secured for freedom of navigation, and Japan needs to maintain a safe environment. Paracel Islands has the increasing presence of China’s military and has been extensively building artificial islands in the Spratly Islands, and has also ventured its potential options in the building of artificial islands at Scarborough Shoal. This has been done by China so as to control the entire South China Sea.²¹ Japan realises this plan of China’s. Japan also knows that Chinese aggressiveness and expansionism in the South China Sea would eventually undermine international law, and if China continues to use force and coercion, then this would not only jeopardise Japan’s maritime position in the East China Sea but will also block the free passage of transit in the South China Sea for its oil supply and other resources, and Japan, being

a sea-bound nation, would, therefore, have to adhere to China's norms.²² Keeping these consequences in mind, Japan first secured its relations with Southeast Asian nations, second, introduced the "Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy" with emphasis on the rule of law, peace and stability, and third, aimed for greater participation of the United States of America.

According to Lionel P. Fatton, "Nowhere are the impacts of the revamp of the Japanese security architecture more evident than in the South China Sea".²³ This can be justified as China as of now is the world's second largest defence spender after the United States of America. China has been modernising its Navy and this has led to some other improvements in the realms of Command, Control, Communications, Computers, Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (C4ISR), defence maintenance & logistics, military research, education & training and military exercises.²⁴ Also, China has allocated its modern ships in its South Sea Fleet based in Zhanjiang, Guangdong and this fleet is regarded as one of the most advanced military assets as it includes four Luyang-class destroyers fitted with vertical launch surface-to-air missiles with a 100 km range; two Jiankai-II class frigates equipped with surface-to-air missiles capable of cold launch; different classes of new attack submarines like the four Kilo-class, two Shang-class, three Song-class and one Yuan-class.²⁵ China has also been growing its air power in the South China Sea and has included the 24 Su-30MK2, and a regiment of JH-7A fighter bombers based in the Hainan Island²⁶ and extended in Woody Island in the Paracel Islands, where it has deployed surface-to-air missiles and constructed concrete hangars capable of housing fighter jets, strategic bombers and air-refuelling aircraft in the Spratly Islands.²⁷ All these military developments are a cause of concern for Japan as well as Vietnam.

Since 2009, Japan had been the first G7 nation to agree to develop strategic partnership with Vietnam and this paved the way for steady defence and security cooperation. Japan and Vietnam, in October 2011, signed the first "Memorandum between the Ministry of Defense of Japan and the Ministry of National Defense of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam on Bilateral Defense Cooperation and Exchange". Both the countries agreed to promote high level exchanges, regular dialogue at the vice-ministerial level and work to cooperate in the sector of humanitarian assistance and disaster relief. Thus, this was the first step towards Japan-Vietnam Defence partnership and paved the way for the initial stages of the defence relations.²⁸

The relations were further enhanced when in January 2013, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, on his first overseas visit to Vietnam since he assumed office, emphasised that "Japan and Vietnam should further advance their strategic partnership as the two states are important partners sharing

regional challenges and in a mutually complementary economic relationship”.²⁹ In May 2013, the Japanese Ministry of Defence held a seminar on underwater medicine in Vietnam and also provided training for underwater medicine for personnel from the Vietnamese Navy at a Japanese naval facility.³⁰ In September 2013, Minister of Defense, Itsunori Onodera, had visited Vietnam, and the two countries agreed to work on defence cooperation. He also visited Cam Ranh Bay, a military port which is located at the strategic choke point of the South China Sea.³¹ Cam Ranh Bay has historically been of vital importance for Japan as the Japanese Army used the port extensively as it aided in logistics to bases, military sea transportation, material supplies also for the naval operations.³² This visit was an embodiment of a high level of mutual trust and portrayed Vietnam’s interest to further strengthen its naval engagement with Japan, especially in the South China Sea.

In July 2013, China established a unified coast guard administered under China’s State Oceanic Administration and integrated it with the already existing coast guard, marine surveillance, fisheries law enforcement and anti-smuggling agencies.³³ Their aim is to maintain China’s national maritime rights and interests like enforcement of China’s maritime claims.³⁴ Seeing this, in April 2014, Vietnam officially established the Vietnam Fisheries Resources Surveillance (VFRS) in collaboration with the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development so as to manage fishing activities in Vietnam’s waters and to protect their fishermen at sea. Vietnam also led a construction of 32 patrol vessels and four large fisheries surveillance vessels capable of carrying helicopters—all approved by the Vietnamese Government.³⁵

In August 2014, there was a major maritime crisis which took place between Vietnam and China as China had placed a giant oil rig in Vietnam’s Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) for more than two months. In May 2014, the then Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung in an interview, during his visit to Philippines, stated that “[w]hat China is doing [with the Haiyang Shiyou 981 oil rig] is totally different to what China is speaking”³⁶ and further added that “Vietnam always wants peace and friendship on the basis of independence, self-reliance, sovereignty, [and] territorial integrity of land and sea; however, Vietnam will never exchange this sacred sovereignty for some kind of unrealisable or dependent peace and friendship”.³⁷ Supporting Vietnam, Japan announced that it would provide the country with six patrol boats to support its maritime defence activities in the South China Sea.³⁸ On October 16, 2014, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe spoke about the ties between Japan and Vietnam deepening dramatically and promoted cooperation under the bandwidth of “Extensive Strategic Partnership” focusing on joint contribution for regional peace and stability and aimed for defence and

security ties. They agreed to work in unison in the realm of maritime security and Japan gave new patrol vessels to Vietnam. They also decided to continue to coordinate in the “rule of law at sea” especially to work together towards the issue of the South China Sea.³⁹ The aim of giving these patrol vessels was to deal with Vietnam’s problem of shortage in maritime law enforcement capabilities so as to monitor China in the South China Sea.

Vietnam’s concern about the shortage of maritime law enforcement capabilities was genuine as China’s presence was increasing in the domain of military and law enforcement vessels and further, China had the world’s largest fleet of fishing vessels and many of these boats were trained and used as “maritime militia”. This was done as a greater strategic game plan by China to make its maritime claims in the South China Sea and the East China Sea.⁴⁰ Another alarming concern was that China’s defence budget in 2015 was US\$ 150 billion and from 2006 to 2015, China’s spending had grown by 123 per cent and this huge jump in defence expenditure was an eye opener towards China’s seriousness with regard to its controlling the South China Sea.⁴¹

Seeing these recent developments, Japan, under the leadership of the former Prime Minister Abe, on May 28, 2016 highlighted the “urgent issue of strengthening Vietnam’s maritime law enforcement capabilities” and also emphasised that the procedure for providing used vessels and the study on the provision of newly built vessels should be taken into urgent consideration. While discussing defence cooperation, Japan and Vietnam voiced their strong concerns about further escalation in attempts to unilaterally change the status quo in the South China Sea and this included large scale and rapid land reclamation, the construction of outposts and their use for military purposes.⁴² Without actually mentioning China’s name, Japan and Vietnam expressed their maritime defence concern regarding South China Sea and affirmed the need to follow the rule of law at sea, freedom of navigation and flights and aim for peaceful settlement of conflicts.

In June 2016, at the Shangri-La Dialogue, Senior Lieutenant General and Deputy Defense Minister Nguyen Chi Vinh had, for the first time, mentioned the term “*dau tranh*” which meant political struggle and he used it to describe the increasing antagonism in the relationship between Vietnam and China. He further quoted that “China was responsible for changes to the status quo along with the threat of militarization”.⁴³ This message was a clear giveaway that Vietnam was in no mood to take China’s aggressiveness and the relations that Vietnam and China were now sharing were strained. This statement was indeed noticed by many countries and especially Japan. On July 15, 2016, Prime Minister Abe reaffirmed their effort to strengthen the maritime law

enforcement capabilities of Vietnam. Japan also highlighted that they would provide firm support in collaboration with countries like the United States of America and Australia,⁴⁴ and this was a major game-changer as the China threat in the domain of maritime defence security had gained prominence for not only Japan and Vietnam but for the United States of America and Australia as well.

On January 16, 2017, the Prime Minister of Vietnam—Nguyen Xuan Phuc—spoke about improving cooperation in the realm of security and defence and also promoting the transfer of defence equipment. Similarly, Prime Minister Abe also wished to bolster the security and defence ties with Vietnam and highlighted the need to enhance defence cooperation in accordance with the policy of Vientiane Vision.⁴⁵ During his visit, Prime Minister Abe spoke about “the magnificent red river which flows directly past Hanoi and empties into the South China Sea and the traverse the East China Sea to connect with the waters of the Tokyo Bay”. He further emphasised that “nothing obstructs their free comings and goings anywhere along the way”.⁴⁶ This speech was a clear indication that Prime Minister Abe had mentioned China without actually naming it and emphasised that the freedom of navigation was essential, which was a direct attack on China, as China didn’t respect the free flow of navigation.

Thereafter, a “Joint Statement on the Deepening of Japan-Vietnam Extensive Strategic Partnership” was signed on June 6, 2017. Both the leaders aimed to focus on the promotion of cooperation in defence equipment and technology along with information sharing and further, emphasised the need to focus on the non-traditional security issues like cyber-security, international terrorism and transnational crimes, and affirmed their commitment towards maritime security and safety cooperation so as to deal with the search and rescue, anti-piracy measures and information sharing between the coast guard agencies and cooperation in the matter of Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships in Asia (ReCAAP). The two countries aimed at defence capacity building assistance and Vietnam welcomed the vessels of the Japan Maritime Self-Defence Force and the patrol ships of the Japan Coast Guard to visit Vietnam.⁴⁷

The importance of Vietnam to maintain a free and open Indo-Pacific rules-based order in the region of Southeast Asia and the broader Indo-Pacific construct would help in the defence cooperation and this led to the visit of the destroyer *JS Izumo* to Cam Ranh Bay. This visit of the destroyer *JS Izumo* was in accordance with the Vientiane Vision and it aimed to strengthen the cooperation and exchanges between the defence and coast guard authorities.

Prime Minister Phuc also requested that both the countries should work in the advancement of the national defence industry.⁴⁸

For Vietnam, Japan is a strategic non-lethal cooperative partner and together they aim to constrain China. It is important to understand that Japan and Vietnam share a profound and deep partnership. Vietnam benefits from Japan as Japan also has territorial issues with China in the East China Sea, and has interests in the South China Sea, and advocates peace and stability in matters of international law along with the freedom of navigation and overflight. This makes Japan and Vietnam as ideal partners and helps them further strengthen their cause for freedom of navigation and secure sea lanes of communications in the South China Sea.

Vietnam has referred to the adversarial dynamics with China and termed it as a “new situation”. Further, Vietnamese leaders continue to speak about China’s aggressiveness and expansionism in the South China Sea through coded language. The late Vietnamese President Tran Dai Quang agreed, in a joint statement in March 2018, “to the need to maintain a peaceful and prosperous Indo-Pacific region-language associated with Trump’s Indo-Pacific strategy, which was widely considered to be aimed at China”.⁴⁹

In April 2018, the Defence Ministers of both the countries signed a “Joint Vision Statement on Japan-Vietnam Defense Cooperation” and agreed to work on the need to strengthen component-to-component exchanges like the visit of the Japan Self-Defense Forces’ vessels and aircraft and promote cooperation in the sectors of human resources training, defence equipment and technology, aviation search and rescue, military medicine, UN peacekeeping operations, cyber security, removal of landmines and unexploded ordinances, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief. The two countries acknowledged the importance of wireless information transmission systems for aeronautical and maritime transport safety and agreed to study the possibility of cooperation so as to establish the High Frequency Radio Monitoring System.⁵⁰ The defence cooperation was a much needed deal between Japan and Vietnam as they had already exhausted all their powers in the strategic realm. It is important to understand that Japan, being an island nation, is highly skilled in maritime defence techniques and so it is helping Vietnam in this domain to make sure that if China tries to use its aggression on Vietnam, then Vietnam would be ready to tackle Chinese aggressiveness and expansionism. It has to be understood that ideologically both China and Vietnam are communist nations, and are called “noodle brothers” due to their historical affiliations, but Vietnam has refused to succumb to Chinese expansionism and belligerence and has requested the help of Japan.

In May 2018, the then Vietnamese President Tran Dai Quang made a historic five-day trip to Japan and celebrated the 45th anniversary of the establishment of Vietnam-Japan diplomatic relations; met the then Japanese Emperor Akihito, and also was awarded the highest honour in Japan. He also met the then Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and spoke about working together in ensuring maritime safety in the South China Sea.⁵¹ Further, in September 2018, Japanese submarine made its first-ever port call in Vietnam⁵² and, shortly after this, Vietnam made a return frigate visit to Japan as a sign of strengthening maritime security ties.⁵³ In March 2019, the Vietnamese deputy defence minister, Senior Lieutenant General Phan Van Giang, visited Japan to meet his military counterpart, including the Japanese defence minister, and both leaders discussed about deepening of the bilateral defence cooperation.⁵⁴ Not much has been disclosed about this high level meeting as both Japan and Vietnam are somewhat worried about China's way of backlashing, and so, most of the details of the meetings have been kept away from the public eye. Also, during the same time, Japanese training ships made a port call at Da Nang.⁵⁵ One needs to see these port calls from a maritime perspective as these exchanges create a bonhomie among the Japanese and Vietnamese forces, and also, both sides know how to function and help the other country out in case of any unforeseen events in the South China Sea. On October 17, 2019, Japan dispatched 19 personnel from its Ground Self-Defense Force to train at the UN Triangular Partnership Project which was implemented by the UN Department of Operational Support. The training took place from November 4 to December 13, 2019. This project was aimed at instructing engineering personnel from the People's Army of Vietnam on the operation of heavy equipment.⁵⁶ The years 2018 to 2020 experienced a number of exchanges in the defence domain as Chinese aggressiveness and expansionism increased to greater heights. According to Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, there has in fact been an increase of the China Coast Guard (CCG) in the South China Sea. As per the analysis of the Automatic Identification System (AIS) data collected by the Marine Traffic, China has continued its efforts of deploying its coast guard symbolically at the edges of the Nine-Dash Line and by doing this China is not only physically occupying the reefs but also signalling its claims. In the last 12 months starting from December 2019, the CCG has been maintaining a persistent presence at the Second Thomas Shoal, Luconia Shoals and the Scarborough Shoal and these incidents have only increased in the times of the Pandemic. According to Figure 1, Luconia and Second Thomas Shoals have witnessed more modest increase where at least one CCG ship has been broadcasted from Luconia for 279 days and

from Second Thomas Shoal for 232 days.⁵⁷ The increase in CCG's is a cause of concern as Southeast Asian claimants largely refrain from deploying law enforcement or naval vessels to contest these routine patrols and, due to this, China will eventually normalise its presence in this area. If this happens then, the Southeast Asian Nations, who are also claimants of the South China Sea, would lose their right to claim.

**Figure 1: China Coast Guard Patrols in the South China Sea
December 1, 2019–November 30, 2020**



Source: Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative Brief, Centre for Strategic and International Studies. <https://amti.csis.org/still-on-the-beat-china-coast-guard-patrols-in-2020/>

It is important to understand that the visit made by Prime Minister Suga in 2020 came at a time when Chinese aggressiveness is at an all-time high and China's expansionism is a major threat to Vietnam in the South China Sea and Japan in the East China Sea. Vietnam has been vocal about Chinese aggressiveness in the South China Sea and has been the most active member among the ASEAN nations to try to tackle Chinese belligerence. Japan also has strategic interests in the South China Sea, and so, Vietnam automatically becomes a strategic friend of Japan. Also, in order to protect the South China Sea and East China Sea, Japan has been actively helping Vietnam in the maritime and defence sectors. Therefore, keeping in mind that China is a concern, Prime Minister Suga and Prime Minister Nguyen Phuc set up a basic agreement where Japan would be exporting defence equipment and technology to Vietnam.

On September 25, 2020, the Senior Lieutenant General Nguyen Chi Vinh congratulated Yamada Takio, the newly appointed Ambassador of Japan in Vietnam and spoke about the positive contributions towards the promotion and development of their ever-growing relationship in the domain of defence cooperation,⁵⁸ and this paved the way for future comprehensive and substantive relationship between Japan and Vietnam.

The future of the defence relations between Japan and Vietnam would further emphasise Japan helping Vietnam in greater capacity building of its MLE capabilities, as already in August 2014, Japan had sent six patrol boats to Vietnam and later in January 2017, former Prime Minister Abe offered additional six new patrol boats. Japan can also try and provide Vietnam with strategic assets for non-combat operations. Vietnam has purchased the Japanese-built ASNARO-2 satellite and Earth observation satellite to monitor the Chinese movements in the South China Sea. The future defence partnership can be based on Vietnam-Japan Defence Cooperation Vision proposed by Vice Defence Minister Nguyen Chi Vinh and Japanese Deputy Minister of Defence Ro Manabe in June 2017 and this vision could consist of high-level bilateral diplomacy and defence dialogue in a 2+2 format like India and Japan have.⁵⁹

Section IV: India's Intertwined Defence Relations with Japan and Vietnam

Over the years, the relationship between India and Japan has been based on partnership of peace and prosperity. In recent times, their relationship has been based on security and defence with special emphasis on maritime relations which paved the way for frequent bilateral naval exercises along with training of Coast Guards. This has resulted in the Malabar exercises between India, Japan and the United States of America and together they aimed for maritime security cooperation which covered the overall strategy of a "free and open Indo-Pacific". India and Japan already have strategic and defence relations and have cooperated beyond bilateral relations and aimed for the enhancement of connectivity in the region of Indo-Pacific. According to the "Japan-India Joint Statement: Toward a Free, Open and Prosperous Indo-Pacific" in September 2017, the Prime Ministers of India and Japan also spoke about "*regard to safeguarding and strengthening a rules-based order and further, pledged to reinforce their efforts to align Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy (FOIP) with India's Act East Policy (AEP), including through enhancing maritime security cooperation, improving connectivity in the wider Indo-Pacific region, strengthening cooperation with ASEAN, and promoting discussions between strategists and experts of the two countries*".⁶⁰ This statement given by the two Prime Ministers highlights their interest in the ASEAN nations especially with regard to the Indo-Pacific strategy, and among all the ASEAN nations, Vietnam has been the most forthcoming Southeast Asian nation to strengthen its relations with India and Japan. Also, strategically to take India's AEP and Japan's FOIP forward, Vietnam is one of the most sought after country and Vietnam also benefits from these policies in a big way.

Therefore, with these common convergences, all three countries could pave the way for a relationship based on a 'trilateralism'.

In the realm of defence and security relations, India and Japan, over the years, have aimed to enhance the Malabar exercises and other joint exercises and also worked on defence equipment and technology cooperation especially in areas of surveillance, unmanned system technologies and defence industry cooperation. On November 30, 2019, India and Japan had their first 2+2 Foreign and Defence Ministerial Meeting in which the two countries focused on expanding the bilateral defence relations and welcomed the conducting of the second "Dharma Guardian-2019" and the second "SHINYUU Maitri-2019". They also promoted cooperation in the field of capacity building in maritime security and Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA). The Ministers welcomed the setting up of the Information Fusion Centre-Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR) by India in December 2018 and agreed to the exchange of information based on the Implementing Arrangement Deeper Cooperation between Indian Navy and the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force.⁶¹ On September 11, 2020, India and Japan signed the logistics agreement whereby the armed forces of both the nations would be allowed to coordinate closely in the realm of services and supplies and this was named the "Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA)".⁶²

India and Japan have also held Defence Dialogues along with several regular and institutionalised engagement through the Annual Defence Ministerial Dialogue, the National Security Advisers' Dialogue, the Defence Policy Dialogue and the Services-to-Services staff talks. They also aimed for bilateral cooperation in defence equipment and technology including the commencement of technical discussion and further collaborated for future research in the area of Unmanned Ground Vehicles and Robotics. The highlight was that Japan had agreed to provide India with 3 state-of-the-art US-2 amphibian aircraft and this has symbolised the mutual trust that both the countries share. The two countries have also agreed on defence industry cooperation and have encouraged each other for equipment collaboration in defence and dual-use technologies.⁶³ In fact, according to the "Japan and India Vision 2025 Special Strategic and Global Partnership in December 2015", they agreed to "expand defence and security ties and concluded an Agreement Concerning Security Measures for the Protection of Classified Military Information and an Agreement Concerning the Transfer of Defense Equipment and Technology".⁶⁴ Thereby, it can be said that India and Japan have robust defence and security relations and China is one of the main factors as both India and Japan have been facing Chinese aggressiveness in the domains of land and water respectively. Japan since the 2000s have been

interested in India as India is not only a growing market but also a regional power in Asia and has the ability to tackle China through land warfare and maritime warfare. Japan has invested in such a robust relationship with India for its strategic location vis-à-vis China, its regional dominance in South Asia. Japan has found a trustworthy friend in India. India and Japan have over the years evolved from strategic partnership to the most recent defence partnership, all due to the China factor.

Apart from Japan, India is Vietnam's "most important and reliable defence partner" as India understands and supports Vietnam in the geopolitics of the South China Sea. Vietnam was already suffering from Chinese aggressiveness in the South China Sea since 2005. Vietnam aimed for defence relations with countries who also saw China as a concern. In 2007, a "Joint Declaration on Strategic Partnership" was arranged for "strategic dialogues at the vice-ministerial level, joint training, intelligence exchanges, and technical assistance" and they also specialised in joint projects, procurement of defence supplies and information sharing in the realm of maritime security, anti-piracy, counterterrorism and cybersecurity. In April 2008, two Indian naval ships *INS Kora* and *INS Kirpan* had visited Vietnam. In October 2008, the Defence Secretary of India had visited Vietnam to attend the fourth round of security dialogue. In 2009, both the countries signed an MoU which aimed for an annual strategic dialogue and high level defence exchanges.⁶⁵

It needs to be understood that since 2011, Vietnam has become cautious of China's intentions in the South China Sea and was looking to increase support from other countries like India to tackle China. In June 2013, four Indian Naval ships, including the indigenously built stealth frigate *INS Satpura* and fleet tanker *INS Shakti* along with 1,200 officers and sailors, had visited Da Nang from June 6 to 10, 2013. From August 5 to 8, 2014, *INS Shivalik*, a stealth multirole frigate had also visited Hai Phong port and again in October 2014, the Indian Coast Guard vessel *Samudra Pehredar* had visited Da Nang port from October 14 to 16, 2014. Also, in 2014, the Modi Administration pledged to provide four patrol vessels to Vietnam.⁶⁶

From 2015, China's defence expenditure has increased by 123 per cent in the South China Sea and this also meant that China was very serious about its claims in the South China Sea. This was yet another reason for Vietnam to look for more like-minded partners such as India to tackle China, and in May 2015, a five-year Joint Vision Statement on Defence Cooperation between 2015 and 2020 was signed. This Defence Cooperation took place when the then Vietnamese Defence Minister General Phung Quang Thanh visited India in May 2015. During this visit, a MoU was also signed to cooperate between the Coast Guards of the two countries. The armed

forces have earlier also worked on capacity building measures and the Navy of both the countries have focused on training, repairs and maintenance support.⁶⁷

Another highlight was in September 2016, when Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited Vietnam and there, he affirmed that “Vietnam is an important pillar of India’s Act East Policy”. Further, during this visit, India and Vietnam elevated their relationship status to “Comprehensive Strategic Security” and focused on defence and security partnership. The leadership of both the countries aimed for a significant progress in defence cooperation like “the exchange of high-level visits, annual high-level dialogue, service-to-service cooperation, naval ship visits, extensive training and capacity building, defence equipment procurement and related transfer of technology, and cooperation at regional fora such as ADMM-Plus”. During this visit, Prime Minister Modi reaffirmed India’s significant interest in promoting defence industry cooperation between India and Vietnam and also committed to provide a new Line of Credit to Vietnam for the same domain. Both the countries had also signed a contract for Offshore High-Speed Patrol Boats between Larsen & Toubro and Vietnam Border Guards and utilised the US\$ 100 million Line of Credit for defence procurement granted to Vietnam by India. India also announced a grant of US\$ 5 million for the construction of an Army Software Park to be situated at Telecommunications University in Nha Trang.⁶⁸

In March 2018, the late Vietnamese President Tran Dai Quang visited India and in a Joint Statement with Prime Minister Modi, both the sides agreed to continue to partner in defence cooperation and capacity, and capacity building methods. Further, both the countries agreed to expedite the implementation of the US\$ 100 million Line of Credit for building high-speed patrol boats for the Vietnam Border Guards.⁶⁹ In November 2018, President Ram Nath Kovind visited Vietnam and opined, “Vietnam was pivotal to India’s ‘Act East’ policy” and that “Vietnam and India share a vision for the Indo-Pacific region, of which the South China Sea is a critical component”, and also discussed the US\$ 100 million credit package to Vietnam which would be used to build high-speed patrol boats which covered a wider range of maritime security.⁷⁰

It is clear that India and Vietnam share mutual cooperation and trust in the domain of defence relations and due to their long historical linkages, their relations are further strengthened. Also, due to Chinese aggressiveness, India and Vietnam’s defence ties are stronger. India leases oil extraction blocks from Vietnam and India has been actively conducting joint naval exercises in the South China Sea with Vietnam and this clearly depicts India’s seriousness towards Vietnam and Vietnam understands it does have a vital place in India’s Act East Policy.

It is clear that India shares extensive defence relations with both Japan and Vietnam, and keeping these relations in mind, Vietnam, India and Japan can work forward on a joint framework of cooperation and collaborate on land as well maritime relations and form a Defence Trilateral.

Section V: Exploring Possibilities for a Defence Trilateral between Japan-India-Vietnam: Policy Recommendations

India and Japan have interests in the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean. Vietnam has major interests in the South China Sea but Vietnam also has a problematic maritime relationship with China in the South China Sea. China's belligerence and aggressiveness has severely made Vietnam, India and Japan worried about their interests in the South China Sea and fear that China would unilaterally change the status quo in the South China Sea. Vietnam is one of the most powerful countries among the ASEAN nations as it has the largest standing army in Southeast Asia and has been trying to build its maritime might with the help of Japan, and these are of strategic interest and can be used, in case of any unforeseen events, against China. Vietnam, was initially close to China, but has drifted away as Chinese aggression is now harming the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Vietnam. Also, the new political leadership is in no mood to be under the Chinese expansionism as Vietnam's national interests are being harmed in the South China Sea. Vietnam understands that the South China Sea is the epitome of trade, commerce and navigation and is a hub of energy and unexplored minerals source which China wants to control unilaterally by force. In this context, Vietnam has granted offshore drilling rights in the South China Sea. Thus, India and Vietnam are jointly involved in oil exploration which brings about a strategic convergence.

Vietnam understands that today, the dynamics have changed with regard China's influence as over the years, there has been several anti-China sentiments being voiced in Southeast Asia and this signifies that even the local people are worried about Chinese aggressiveness and expansionism. ASEAN has also adopted a "free and open Indo-Pacific strategy" and this changes the entire dynamics between Vietnam, India and Japan as all the three are important players in the Indo-Pacific. Therefore, keeping in mind the common concern there is a strong possibility for a Trilateral to be formed between Japan, India and Vietnam. Since China is a primary concern in the domain of security and defence, Japan-India-Vietnam can work forward on a joint framework of cooperation and collaborate on land as well as maritime relations and form a Defence Trilateral.

The Defence Trilateral between Japan-India-Vietnam can work in the following domains:

- **Trilateral Defence Cooperation**

In order to further strengthen relations within the Defence Trilateral between Japan, India and Vietnam, they should initiate a Trilateral defence cooperation and exchange which should consist of joint exercises, logistical bases along with disaster management training. The joint naval exercises should take place in Indian Ocean near Andaman and Nicobar Islands, East China Sea near the coast of Nagasaki and South China Sea near Cam Ranh Bay so as to find ways to train the navies for any unforeseen event. Further, the geostrategic position of Vietnam is such that it is at the heart of the South China Sea which makes it a verified claimant of the South China Sea. Cam Ranh Bay is called the “Sweet Stream” as it is one of the most sought after wide, deep and protected natural harbours near the South China Sea and this makes it the most coveted geostrategic asset to tackle Chinese activities in the South China Sea. This Bay can be used as a launching pad for military operations in East Asia and can also be used as a refuelling station. Due to all these strategic advantages that the Cam Ranh Bay holds, it is rightly called the “Apple of the Eye of the East”.⁷¹ Cam Ranh Bay access should be given to the Indian and the Japanese navies as they can use the Cam Ranh Bay as a refuelling station and also build a resting hostel for visiting foreign soldiers. India and Japan must invest in developmental projects in the Cam Ranh Bay so that it helps strengthen the military capabilities and is war ready in case China needs to be dealt with.

- **Create a Strategic Maritime Chain of Ports to tackle Chinese Expansionism**

The three countries could also create a Strategic Maritime Chain of Ports to tackle Chinese expansionism; the three countries can build their own version of a “string of pearls” by creating a strategic maritime chain of ports like Okinawa to Cam Ranh Bay to Andaman and Nicobar Islands.⁷² By doing this, the three countries can create a form of regular port interaction between these points and joint exercises can be done also with developing methods of countering China at the sea. These three points would be of strategic importance as they would be able to monitor and create a state-of-art surveillance system to deal with Chinese vessels.

- **Cybersecurity**

In order to deal with China, all the three countries must identify sectors of common intersections like cybersecurity. In 2016, India and Vietnam had

welcomed the signing of an MoU on cybersecurity and also aimed for the early conclusion for the MoU on Cooperation between the National Security Council Secretariat of India and the Ministry of Public Security of Vietnam, which emphasised the need to establish the Deputy Ministerial level dialogue. They aimed to enhance cooperation in the matters of traditional and non-traditional security issues like cybersecurity, counterterrorism, transnational crimes, disaster management and response along with capacity building and training.⁷³ In 2020, India and Japan have also finalised the text for the cybersecurity agreement which aims to promote cooperation in security and resilience in the areas of critical information infrastructure, 5G, Internet of Things (IoT) and Artificial Intelligence (AI).⁷⁴ As part of defence relations, Japan and Vietnam have also agreed to work on the broader framework of cybersecurity, among others. Thereby, Vietnam, India and Japan can collaborate and work on a joint cybersecurity trilateral which should initially start with a trilateral training and capacity building and eventually lead to specialised MoU on cybersecurity between the three countries.

- **Military Cryptographic Surveillance-cum-Information Sharing System**

In the domain of defence technology, the three countries can work towards building a military cryptographic surveillance-cum-information sharing system which would further strengthen defence diplomacy. In October 2020, there was a ‘Five Eyes’ meeting where India joined the “Five Eyes Intelligence Alliance” along with the US, the UK, Canada, Japan, Australia and New Zealand. In this meeting, Japan had asked large tech companies to come up with solutions for law enforcement so as to access end-to-end encrypted communications which would help these seven nations look into the serious crimes and matters of national security. Further, these countries asserted their need for encryption backdoors which would include encrypted instant messaging applications along with device encryption, custom encrypted applications and encryption across integrated platforms.⁷⁵ India and Japan can also help Vietnam with this military cryptographic surveillance and create their own network so as to keep monitoring Chinese activities in the South China Sea.

India and Japan have already collaborated on information sharing systems along with technical assistance and on December 12, 2015, an “Agreement between the Government of Japan and the Government of the Republic of India had taken place concerning the security measures for the protection of Classified Military Information” and they focused on “any defence-related information which requires protection against unauthorised disclosure in the

interests of national security of the Providing Party and which is subject to a Security Classification and generated by, or for the use of, or under the jurisdiction of the Competent Authorities of the Providing Party. CMI may be in any form, including oral, visual, electronic, magnetic, or documentary forms or equipment or technology".⁷⁶ India and Vietnam as part of their defence cooperation have agreed to cooperate in cybersecurity and information sharing. Vietnam has permitted India to set up a satellite imaging and tracking centre on its soil, and in exchange, Vietnam would get access to images covering the region taken by Indian satellites. The geostrategic position of Vietnam is of vital importance as regional activities can be monitored and, more importantly, Chinese activities in the South China Sea can be monitored and this would cater to the interest of Japan, India and Vietnam.

- **A Multilateral Agreement between Japan-India-Vietnam-US**

A multilateral agreement between Japan-India-Vietnam-US could also be signed as the United States also has interests in the South China Sea and is actively involved in Okinawa. A Trilateral Naval Exercise in 2016 has taken place between the US, Japan and India in the South China Sea. Vietnam can also be invited to attend the same in future. Also, there are proposals to have extended members of the QUAD to counter China's influence in the region. Vietnam, could be a major player in the QUAD subsection and would be a complete game-changer as Vietnam is already the ASEAN Chair in 2020 and has handled the COVID-19 crisis well in ASEAN. Vietnam has been able to establish itself as a prominent regional player by tackling COVID-19 diplomacy well especially through their mask diplomacy and rice diplomacy. With Vietnam's image getting further enhanced, QUAD should take Vietnam's inclusion to the QUAD in all seriousness. Vietnam should be promoted more in all sectors so as to make the ASEAN nations, who are supporting China, experience a change of mind and start looking to support other nations who are also facing Chinese aggressiveness and free themselves from Chinese debt traps and bullying and work towards a greater goal of freedom of navigation within the greater framework of a free and open navigable Indo-Pacific.

Section VI: Conclusion

It is quite clear that China's aggressiveness and expansionism is a major threat to the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Japan, India and Vietnam. China's behaviour highlights its aim of making China great and also aiming for the Chinese Century. But the question is, at what cost? This paper has highlighted how China's initial and continuous steps with aggressiveness has pushed away its civilisational friends like Vietnam and Japan and these

countries have found solace in countries like India and the United States of America. It tried to highlight some possible way aheads to deal with the changing situation.

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The relationship between Japan and Vietnam have become stronger especially in the defence sector and have reached greater heights as Chinese expansionism has become the core cause of concern for Japan and Vietnam. The increased maritime aggression by China has led Japan and Vietnam to come to a consensus of agreeing to the transfer of defence equipment and technology. It has also led to the thought process of the inclusion of India as the third partner which would pave the way for a Defence Trilateral Partnership between Japan, India and Vietnam. The paper suggests futuristic recommendations like the formation of a multilateral agreement between Japan, India, Vietnam and the US which would lay the strategic foundation of a defence multilateralism as well.



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