

# How India's growing relations with Vietnam could challenge China's interests in the region?

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## Introduction:

Vietnam is one of India's closest international partners and emerging as a pivotal state and a strategic pillar of India's Act East Policy. Over the last decade, Vietnam has also become a vital part of India's strategy to counter China's rise in Asia.

When Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited Vietnam in 2016 (the first by an Indian prime minister in 15 years), he made it clear that India desires to expand its presence in the Southeast Asia. In recent years, India wants to play a more assertive role in the Indo-Pacific region, as Indian Prime Minister Modi wishes to emerge as leader and promoter of peace, prosperity, and stability in Asia. Therefore, India's ambition to build closer partnership with Vietnam is not only an approach to establish its presence in China's periphery but also promote India's greater interests in the region.

The shared focus of strengthening bilateral ties between India and Vietnam has been regional security issues and trade; however, threats emerging from a rising China and mutual strategic interests have greatly contributed to the deepening of ties between Vietnam and India.<sup>1</sup> Today both countries engage as comprehensive strategic partners. Therefore, the main aim of this paper is to analyze to what extent the relations between India and Vietnam could challenge Chinese interests in region.

## Strategic Relations:

Today the MTCR membership has grown to 34 India is facing increasing challenges due to China's rise and has been closely examining China's maritime expansion into the Indian Ocean. India considers Chinese engagements as expansionary policy, especially after the standoff between the Chinese and Indian armies at the Doklam Plateau near the China-India-Bhutan trijunction. In response, India has become more active in enhancing its relationship with China's neighbors in the south and engaging other regional countries who share the concerns of India on China.

On the other hand, China's growing engagements in the South China Sea and sea claims is a matter of direct security concern for Vietnam. As Hanoi continue to condemn Beijing's military drills and engagements in disputed sea, the hostilities with China and Vietnam rises.<sup>2</sup> The fragile relations and growing sense of competition between China and Vietnam has also provided India with an opportunity to increase closer strategic relations with Vietnam.

After the border clashes between China and India and Chinese engagements in the South China Sea, the anti-China sentiment in both India and Vietnam rises significantly. India and Vietnam both believes that China has ambitious plans to increase military deployments in disputed seas and the presence of Chinese military in South China Sea continue to cause apprehensions among the regional countries.

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1. Harsh V. Pant, "India and Vietnam: A Strategic Partnership in the Making", RSIS Nanyang Technological University Singapore, Policy Brief, April 2018.

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2. Pakistan Today Newspaper, "Vietnam slams China over military drills in disputed sea", September 6, 2017, accessed at: <https://www.pakistantoday.com.pk/2017/09/06/vietnam-slams-china-over-military-drills-in-disputed-sea/>

Chinese military engagements in South China Sea have faced criticism not only from China's neighbors including India, Vietnam and the Philippines, but also from the U.S., UK and other European nations.

The commonly perceived China threat has led to close partnership between India and Vietnam. Defense and security cooperation has become an important pillar of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between the two countries as depicted from visits to Vietnam by the Indian National Security Advisor (April 2015) and Minister of Defense (June 2016 and June 2018), and the visits to India by the Vietnamese Minister of National Defense (May 2015 and December 2016) as well as mutual visits by each other's naval/coast guard vessels, particularly in 2018 and 2019.

Reaching out to Indians overseas has emerged as an important instrument of India's foreign policy. There are about 3000 Indians settled in Ho Chi Minh City, who are playing an important role in promoting India's image and interests in the country. India is closely engaging the Indian community in Vietnam to promote multilevel cooperation between the two countries.

Due to Indian community's efforts, in recent years, Vietnam is willing to deepen trade and defense ties with an Asian power, India; However, Vietnam remain cautious of provoking China beyond a point while Indian capacity building assistance to Vietnam is seen by Indian strategic community as a "symmetric response" to China's close military relationship with Pakistan.

In March 2018, Memorandum of Understanding was signed between the two countries in New Delhi to strengthen the technical cooperation in the field of atomic energy for peaceful purposes and cooperation between the DAE's Global Centre for Nuclear Energy Partnership (GCNEP) and the Vietnam Atomic Energy Institute (VinAtom).

Moreover, in November 2018, Indian Chief of Army Staff General Bipin Rawat visited Vietnam to deepen the defense relation between the two countries. Indian Military Chief visited Hanoi after the state visit of Indian President Ram Nath Kovind during

which he was given the rare honor of addressing the Vietnam National Assembly, which only Chinese President Xi Jinping had done before.

Both countries are members of the Mekong-Ganga Cooperation, created to develop and enhance close ties between India and nations of Southeast Asia. In May 2019, India and Vietnam agreed to further strengthen cooperation in defense and security, peaceful uses of atomic energy and outer space, oil and gas and renewable energy. In August 2019, the two held a launching ceremony for a patrol vessel project to break ground on what is effectively the first specific project to operationalize their defense partnership under \$100 million Line of Credit (LoC) extended by India.

India and Vietnam reached consensus on wide array of issues during State Visit of Vietnamese President on November 21, 2018. Both countries agreed to implement the Joint Vision Statement on Vietnam-India Defense Cooperation for the period of 2015-2020 which includes collaboration between the Army, Air Force, Naval and Coast Guard of the two countries, as well as cooperation in cyber security and information sharing.

Indian side expressed their satisfaction at the progress of implementation of US \$100 million Line of Credit for the building of high-speed patrol vessels for the Vietnamese Border Guards and Indian's offer of the US \$500 million Line of Credit to defense industry of Vietnam.

Both sides agreed that it is essential to strengthen cooperation in maritime domain including anti-piracy, security of sea lanes, and exchange of white shipping. Indian officials believe that expanding defense and maritime ties with Vietnam and extending collaboration with the U.S. is a crucial step to contain Chinese aggressions in the South China Sea.

Indian and Vietnamese officials also reached a consensus on promoting bilateral investments, including cooperation projects between PVN and ONGC in oil and gas exploration on land, continental shelf and Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) of Vietnam.

The Indian side welcomed and agreed to create facilitating conditions for Vietnamese businesses investing in India, particularly in agriculture, agro-processing, marine products and wood products. India is encouraging Vietnam to come out of Chinese reliance and explore further opportunities to expand trade relations with India.

In the science and technology domain, India and Vietnam have agreement on Cooperation in the Peaceful Uses of Atomic Energy and have exchange and research activities. Both would have close cooperation for the effective implementation of Project for the construction of the Satellite Tracking & Data Reception Station and Data Processing Facility under the ASEAN – India cooperation framework in Vietnam.

### **Business Relations:**

The economic ties between India and Vietnam date back to 1978 when both countries signed a bilateral trade agreement.<sup>3</sup> By 1982, both countries established the joint commission to strengthen economic, technical, and scientific cooperation. Although, initially limited trade was conducted between the two countries, due to the 1997 Asian financial crisis and economic slowdown. The first major Indian investment came from OVL in 1989 off the coast of Vung Tau, located east of Ho Chi Minh City.<sup>4</sup>

However, today, India is among the thirty biggest foreign investors in Vietnam with 223 projects with the total accumulated registered capital of \$913.33 million as of April 2019, focusing on energy, industry park infrastructure development, IT, pharmaceuticals, and agriculture. However, Indian investments are still smaller in magnitude as compared to other Asian countries like China, Japan,

and South Korea and only a handful of large Indian firms such as ONGC Videsh, Marico Industries, TATA Group etc dominate India's portfolio.

Vietnam is the third-largest garments exporter after China and Bangladesh with an export turnover of over US\$ 30 billion and has emerged as the preferred choice of electronics and mobile phone companies due to U.S.-China trade war.

In 2019, a number of Vietnamese and Indian businesses attended a networking event. Businesses include many prominent companies from India and Vietnam such as Saigon-Hue Investment Corporation, FLC Group, CMC Telecom, KinhBac City Development Holding Corporation, Bee Logistics Corporation, Indochine Counsel, IV International Co., Ltd., Tech Mahindra Ltd., MINDA Vietnam Automotive Co., Ltd., JAPFA Comfeed Vietnam Ltd., and others.

Indian engagements with Vietnam are also focusing to promote Indian trade and strategic objectives in the country. Indian Prime Minister Modi described Vietnam as an important trade partner of India and the bilateral trade between the two countries has doubled from USD 7.8 billion three years ago to nearly USD 14 billion.

The two countries also expanded cooperation in areas such as space exploration and cybersecurity. New Delhi and Hanoi signed the Inter-Governmental Framework Agreement for the Exploration of Outer Space for Peaceful Purposes, and agreed to conclude the Implementing Arrangement between the Indian Space Research Organization and the Vietnam Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment on the establishment of a Tracking and Data Reception Station and a Data Processing Facility in Vietnam under the India-ASEAN Space Cooperation.<sup>5</sup>

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3. Yogendra Singh, "IPCS Special Report: India Vietnam Relations, The Road Ahead", No. 40, April 2007, accessed at: <https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/93321/IPCS-SpecialReport-40.pdf>

4. Shantanu Srivastav in Rajiv K. Bhatia et al, "India-Vietnam: Agenda for Strengthening Partnership", Delhi, Shipra Publications, 2013, p. 26.

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5. Ministry of External Affairs, India, 'Joint Statement Between India and Vietnam During Visit of PM to Vietnam', September 3, 2016, accessed at: [http://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/27362/Joint\\_Statement\\_between\\_India\\_and\\_Vietnam\\_during\\_the\\_visit\\_of\\_Prime\\_Minister\\_to\\_Vietnam](http://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/27362/Joint_Statement_between_India_and_Vietnam_during_the_visit_of_Prime_Minister_to_Vietnam)

Vietnam has also granted Indian oil firm ONGC Videsh Ltd (OVL) an approval to explore oil block 128 which is an area of dispute between China and Vietnam in the South China Sea. Although India does not gain much economic benefits from exploration, India and Vietnam agreed to extend such an agreement in order to put pressures on China and keep Indian presence in the disputed waters.<sup>6</sup>

## Defense Relations:

The formal framework of defense cooperation between India and Vietnam is based on defense cooperation signed between the countries in 2000. Back then the training of Air Force pilots, joint naval and coast guard and naval exercises and regular dialogue at Defence Ministers' level were institutionalized. This defense cooperation was further strengthened by the July 2007 Strategic Partnership Agreement which now provides the framework for future of cooperation in the defense field. Under this agreement both the countries committed to strengthen their relations in the political, security, defense, cultural, science and technological fields. However, during the recent years both countries speeded up the engagements due to the concerns on both sides regarding China's growing activities in the South China Sea.

Maritime cooperation between India and Vietnam remains the focus of the defense cooperation between the two countries. Vietnam has also given India the right to use its strategically significant port in Nha Trang, near Cam Ranh Bay. The Indian Armed Forces have been engaged with the capacity building of the Vietnamese military forces particularly the navy of Vietnam. In this field the areas of focus between the navies of two countries have been training, repairs and maintenance support, regular ship visits, as well as exchanges between think tanks. The Indian Navy has also been making regular visits to the southern Vietnamese port.

For Vietnam's deterrence against China's rise and its moves in the South China Sea has been one of the major factors to improve its defense industry and enhance its naval capabilities. In this regard, India is eager to play increased role and support Vietnam through India's indigenous capabilities in defense production and further develop Vietnamese defense industry. Indian navy has already provided assistance to Vietnamese navy through training to operate the new Russian-built submarines. Moreover, India is also a front-runner for upgrading two Vietnamese Petya-class frigates.

India's defense relations with Vietnam are mainly to support Vietnamese endeavors in the region to counter Chinese moves and secure regional interests of India and ASEAN. India also hopes to increase its trade and expand its defense market in Vietnam. In this regard, India and Vietnam have signed a Joint Vision Statement on defense cooperation for 2015-2020, some of the agreements reached between the two countries include:

India had earlier extended a \$100 million Line of Credit (LOC) to Vietnam to help acquire patrol boats and later offered additional \$500 million line of credit to Vietnam for defense purchases from India.

India has offered Akash surface-to-air missile (SAM), which has a range of 27 kilometers and can achieve speeds in excess of Mach 2. Since Akash has more than 90% indigenous content India can transfer this weapon system to Vietnam without taking into consideration the views of a third party like Russia, which co-developed the BrahMos.

India's Bharat Electronics (BEL), opened its first-ever representative office in Hanoi with the objective of marketing the company's weapons systems, radar systems, naval systems, military communication systems, electronic warfare (EW) systems, combat management systems and coastal surveillance systems.

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6. The Economic Times India "ONGC Videsh gets 2-year extension for exploring Vietnamese oil block", ET News, Jul 09, 2017, accessed at: <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/>

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industry/energy/oil-gas/ongc-videsh-gets-2-year-extension-for-exploring-vietnamese-oil-block/articleshow/59512891.cms

Cooperation in the sphere of cyber security is epitomized by the Army Software Park in Nha Trang, which is being built with Indian financial support of \$5 million.

Both countries are also looking at the proposal under which India would train Vietnam People's Air Force (VPAF) pilots on their Su-30 MK2Vs which are similar to the Su-30 MKIs operated by the Indian Airforce.

Indian Navy has been training Vietnamese sailors to operate the Vietnamese People's Navy's (VPN's) Kilo-class submarines at Visakhapatnam since 2013. In August 2019, a project launching ceremony was held for 10 high-speed patrol vessels for the Vietnamese Border Guards project under \$100 million line of credit extended by India's Larsen & Toubro.

### Challenges for China:

In recent years, India has paced up its' efforts to interrupt China's OBOR/Silk Road, and CPEC projects and discourage other nations from joining such projects, by highlighting the economic traps and China's hidden strategic aims to control the region, as well as undermining China's business and trade with other regional countries.

At the same time, India is also eager to develop parallel alliances in oil transportation sea-lanes and areas of strategic interests against China's quest for bases, port facilities, strategic reserves in South Asia, Central Asia and Indo-Pacific region. In this regard India is increasing its engagements with China's rivals and competitors, with increased collaboration with Vietnam, Japan and Taiwan.

As in 2021, both India and Vietnam would become

non-permanent members of the UN Security Council therefore close cooperation between two countries could further create obstacles for China and could draw world's attention to the Chinese moves in South China Sea as well as its dominating policies towards its neighbors. therefore, close diplomatic relations between India and Vietnam would further encourage India to increase its engagements against China in the South China Sea.

According to a visiting fellow of the NESAC Centre for Strategic Studies, Mohan Malik indicated that India and Vietnam's partnership is much like China's relationship with Pakistan. He pointed out that, "as Islamabad and Beijing closely coordinate and support their military moves against India, New Delhi and Hanoi have now begun briefing and supporting each other vis-à-vis Beijing. And just as Pakistan favors a strong Chinese naval presence in the Indian Ocean, Vietnam favors an Indian naval presence in the South China Sea."<sup>7</sup>

Mohan Malik believes that both India and Vietnam share similar views on China and perceive it as an expansionist power that can pose a serious threat to its neighbors. Therefore, India by strengthening its cooperation with Vietnam seeks to contain and encircle China in the Southeast Asia.<sup>8</sup>

However, Carlyle Thayer of the University of New South Wales at the Australian Defense Force Academy, believes that close cooperation between India and Vietnam would be threatened by Chinese aggression. Thayer points out that, when India did not sell BrahMos missile to Vietnam mainly due to the fear of China's reaction, hence any move to strengthen the defense cooperation between India and Vietnam would face China's aggression and both India and Vietnam do not wish to further worsen their relations with China.<sup>9</sup>

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7. Maria Siow, "Is an India-Vietnam military alliance about to clash with a China-Pakistan one?", *The Star*, August 27, 2020, accessed at: <https://www.thestar.com.my/aseanplus/asean-plus-news/2020/08/27/is-an-india-vietnam-military-alliance-about-to-clash-with-a-china-pakistan-one>

8. Ibid 7.

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9. Xavier Francis, "India, Philippines ready to work together in the South China Sea to check Chinese belligerence", *The EurAsian Times*, August 29, 2020, accessed at: <https://eurasian-times.com/after-china-pakistan-india-vietnam-emerging-as-the-next-iron-brothers-of-asia-experts/>

However, India's deepening ties with Vietnam can also bring India long-term benefits and can pose challenges to China in the future. A successful cooperation between India and Vietnam particularly in the defense field could also attract other Southeast Asian countries to strengthen their partnership with India, especially the countries that share India's vision of China threat and considers Chinese foreign policy as increasingly assertive.

The United States Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has also made statements in support of both India and Vietnam, by stating that the South China Sea is "not China's maritime empire," and calling for a global coalition to counter China's actions.<sup>10</sup>

China's claim in the South China sea poses a significant threat to both the U.S. and India's freedom of navigation and economic presence in Southeast Asia. Therefore, in recent years, the U.S. and India have expressed interests in carrying out navigation activities in the South China Sea and expand its relations with Southeast Asian nations.

Both India and Vietnam share the security concerns in the South China Sea. According to Huynh Tam Sang, China's increasing activities in disputed waters and dominating attitude has seriously disturbed Vietnamese leaders, while threatening India's strategic objectives in the region. Therefore it is a logical outcome for India and Vietnam to strengthening defense ties and counter rising tensions from China's attempts to dominate the Southeast Asia region.<sup>11</sup>

Some experts believe that Indian military presence in the Southeast Asia could not only enhance Vietnam's defensive capability but also reduce defense

expenditures. India's engagement in the disputed waters, as well as its diplomatic and military support to Vietnam is considered important for India has been struggling to play a vital role in Southeast Asian region. While Vinod Anand believe that, India and Vietnam could also extend cooperation with other Asia Pacific countries such as Japan, South Korea, Indonesia, and Australia, to further counter Chinese aggression in disputed waters.<sup>12</sup>

Both India and Vietnam consider China as an aggressive neighbor at their land and maritime borders. Therefore, both countries are facing a somewhat similar threat and share security concerns. Being emerging leaders in South Asia and Southeast Asia, India and Vietnam hope to counter China threat by cooperation with each other and believe that increased political interactions, defense cooperation and naval exercises in South China Sea can address their security concerns.<sup>13</sup>

India has already desired to increase its defense exports and Southeast Asian countries could likely be its main target. India hopes to attract the neighborhood of China, and cash the China threat among the ASEAN countries. India has already identified 15 weapon systems for exports including Astra beyond-visual range air to air missiles, Prahar surface to surface missiles, light combat aircraft (LCA), BrahMos supersonic cruise missile, SONARs, Arjun Mk-2 battle tanks, airborne early warning systems, battlefield radars and a variety of unmanned systems.

Both India and Vietnam heavily rely on Russian-made arms, while India accounts for almost 62 percent of total sales but Indian officials are unsatisfied with

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10. Remarks to the Press by the U.S. Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo, "Secretary Michael R. Pompeo and British Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab at a Press Availability", U.S. Department of State, July 21, 2020, accessed at: <https://www.state.gov/secretary-michael-r-pompeo-and-british-foreign-secretary-dominic-raab-at-a-press-availability/>

11. Huynh Tam Sang, "Time to Forge India-Vietnam Defense Ties", Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, August 21, 2020, accessed at: <https://amti.csis.org/time-to-forge-india-vietnam-defense-ties/>

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12. Vinod Anand, "India-Vietnam Defence and Security Cooperation", Vivekanade International Foundation, May 12, 2017, accessed at: <https://www.vifindia.org/article/2017/may/12/achievements-india-vietnam-defence-and-security-cooperation>

13. Pankaj Jha, "Vietnam- India cooperation against China's aggressiveness", Modern Diplomacy, October 11, 2020, accessed at: <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2020/10/11/vietnam-india-cooperation-against-chinas-aggressiveness/>

China and Russia's defense cooperation especially because China is buying defense systems that India wants for itself.

Traditionally, India has been trying to step up its engagement with the Central Asian region but CPEC and Pakistan have proved as the biggest hurdle in realizing India's objectives of ensuring strengthened economic-political relations with Central Asia. Therefore, in recent years, India has started to look towards Southeast Asia to extend its sphere of influence and counter much bigger threat, China.

## Conclusion

India attaches great importance to its relations with Vietnam and hope to incorporate a similar model in engaging with other Southeast Asian states such as the Philippines and Indonesia. While, India and the Philippines have already agreed to extend strategic partnership in the South China Sea.<sup>14</sup> India seek to further engage with other Southeast Asian nations using similar elements that formulate India-Vietnam relations, including extending line of credit for defense acquisition and increasing India's defense exports.

Despite the developments in India-Vietnam relations, the lack of substantial results on BrahMos cruise missiles and Akash surface-to-air missiles sales show that the strategic relationship between India and Vietnam lacks momentum. However, recent developments indicate that India is more willing to move forward with its relations to Vietnam and shift from its policy towards China, due recent tensions with China and increased moves by Beijing in the greater Indian Ocean region.

It is likely that India and Vietnam would further cooperate with each other to develop Vietnam's

indigenous defense sector and India could increase its defense exports to Vietnam as well as other Southeast Asian nations. India also hopes to formulate intelligence sharing agreement with Vietnam and other nations and strengthen its strategic relationship with China's neighbors. Moreover, India is increasingly enhancing its strategic position and showing interest and commitment in the region by supporting the security concerns of Southeast Asian countries, especially the nations who share concerns regarding China.

Although, economic development remains a priority for India and Vietnam, the development of defense relations between the countries has strengthened significantly in recent years. Both India and Vietnam hope to increase their defense and strategic partnership, especially to counter Chinese moves, however, both countries do not wish to engage in any direct confrontation with China and aim to secure their mutual concerns by maintaining peace and stability in the region.

While both India and Vietnam have witnessed remarkable improvement in economic, defense and strategic relationship, and perceive China as a common threat, it is observed that both India and Vietnam have different approaches when it comes to China. India mainly seeks to promote its defense industry and increase its sphere of influence in Indian Ocean region, while Vietnam being a part of ASEAN seek to address its issue through cooperation and cannot afford to jeopardize its trade relations with China.

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14. EurAsian Times Desk, "India, Philippine ready to work together in the South China Sea to check Chinese belligerence", The EurAsian Times, July 7, 2020, accessed at: <https://eurasianimes.com/india-philippine-ready-to-work-together-in-the-south-china-sea-to-check-a-belligerent-china/>

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15. Don McLain Gill, "Closer India-Vietnam Relations: Implications for Southeast Asia", Geopolitical Monitor, September 28, 2020, accessed at: <https://www.geopoliticalmonitor.com/closer-india-vietnam-relations-implications-for-southeast-asia/>

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