



ISSN: 0976-3376

Available Online at <http://www.journalajst.com>

ASIAN JOURNAL OF  
SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

Asian Journal of Science and Technology  
Vol. 08, Issue, 04, pp.4583-4592, April, 2017

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

### VIETNAM - INDIA DEFENSE COOPERATION SINCE 2007: REALITY AND PROSPECT

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#### ARTICLE INFO

##### Article History:

Received 17<sup>th</sup> January, 2017  
Received in revised form  
14<sup>th</sup> February, 2017  
Accepted 20<sup>th</sup> March, 2017  
Published online 30<sup>th</sup> April, 2017

##### Key words:

Defense,  
Security,  
Strategic interest,  
The South China Sea

#### ABSTRACT

This paper examines Vietnam-India defense cooperation since the two countries elevated their bilateral relations to the strategic partnership in 2007. The paper gives an insight into the reality of the bilateral defense partnership highlighted by high-level exchange visits, an annual security dialogue, naval port visits, military training and maritime capacity building as well as assistance in maintaining military equipment, and arms transfer. The new height of Vietnam-India partnership is arguably an indispensable result not only due to the long-standing relations of amity and the elevation of the strategic partnership, but also, more importantly, due to both countries' increasingly converging strategic interests in the past decade. The new achievements in Vietnam-India defense and security cooperation will lay a sound ground for both countries to forge ahead comprehensive and authentic cooperation in the coming years to bid for a greater role and position in the region and in the context of a rising and increasingly assertive China, particularly in territorial claims. This study is conducted employing qualitative method with data drawn from published party documents, policy papers, international journal articles, and particularly domestic and international media outlets that covered debates on foreign policy related issues and reviews of the Ministry of Defense and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

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#### INTRODUCTION

India-Vietnam relations have been traditionally friendly and cordial since their foundations were laid by Prime Minister Nehru and President Ho Chi Minh over the last half a century ago. The relationship was primarily built on an ideological foundation of pan-Asian nationalism, reinforced by the Cold War struggle against the United States and by shared fears of Chinese hegemony. In the aftermath of the Cold War, India-Vietnam relationship was further strengthened as India pursued its 'Look East' policy, viewing Vietnam as an "important pillar" in New Delhi's Southeast Asia regional engagement policy. In face of the increasingly complicated regional and global contexts since the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, notably a complex strategic environment in Asia-Pacific that impinges on both countries' security and national security interests, India-Vietnam relations have obtained new achievements, culminating in Vietnam's Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung's visit to India where both sides agreed to upgrade the comprehensive cooperation established in 2003 between the two countries to a strategic partnership. This new momentum of relations encompasses thirty-three points and mapped out cooperation in five major areas: political, defense and security; closer economic cooperation and commercial

engagement; science and technology; cultural and technical; and multilateral and regional cooperation. Since the wake of the strategic partnership, Hanoi and New Delhi have forged ahead their comprehensive and authentic cooperation in all the aforementioned areas. However, defense cooperation has come into play as the unprecedented level of particular concern, as the joint statement at the conclusion of India's President Mukherjee's state visit to Hanoi reiterated "cooperation in national defense is an important pillar in India-Vietnam strategic partnership." The new advancement in bilateral defense cooperation is highlighted by high-level exchange visits, an annual security dialogue, naval port visits, military training and maritime capacity building, assistance in maintaining military equipment, arms transfer, cooperation in non-traditional security issues, and cooperation at multilateral regional forums. This paper endeavors to examine the reality of the cooperation areas in Vietnam-India defense relations and to give an insight into the key factors behind this new momentum, and to explore prospects for Hanoi-New Delhi defense cooperation in light of the strategic partnership in the years to come.

#### Defense cooperation on the fore

Since the establishment of Vietnam-India strategic partnership in 2007, defense cooperation has emerged as a significant

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pillar. The Joint Declaration on Strategic Partnership clearly set out six areas of cooperation under the political, defense and security heading: First, India and Vietnam agreed to hold an annual Strategic Dialogue at deputy minister level; second, both sides agreed to place future emphasis on defense supplies, joint projects, training cooperation and intelligence exchanges; third, both sides agreed to enhance contacts and exchange visits between their defense and security establishments; fourth, in light of shared maritime interests, India and Vietnam agreed to enhance cooperation in capacity building, technical assistance and information sharing between relevant agencies with a particular attention to security of sea-lanes, anti-piracy, prevention of pollution and search and rescue; fifth, both sides resolved to strengthen bilateral cooperation to combat terrorism and to promote cooperation in cyber security; and sixth, both sides agreed to cooperate to address non-traditional security issues. To reinforce this, in 2009, Vietnam and India signed a Memorandum of Understanding on defense cooperation. This has laid a sound ground for the increasingly intensified bilateral cooperation in defense and security over nearly the past decade.

### ***High-level exchange visits in bid for deepening defense cooperation***

Over the past decade, high level bilateral visits from both sides for the strengthening of defense cooperation have reached an unprecedented level of particular concern. In Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung's visit to India in 2007, both sides signed a joint declaration on strategic partnership in which the leaders of both sides recognized the importance of Vietnam-India's role in promoting regional security and stressed the strengthening of bilateral cooperation in defense supplies, joint projects, training cooperation, intelligence exchanges, and visits between the defense and security establishments of the two countries. Notably, both sides agreed to work closely to enhance cooperation in capacity building, technical assistance and information sharing between their respective relevant agencies for ensuring security of sea-lanes, among other things.<sup>1</sup> Shortly after forming a strategic partnership, in December 2007, India's Defense Minister A. K. Antony visited Vietnam, and it was agreed that India would provide the Vietnamese Navy with up to 5,000 different kinds of spare parts.<sup>2</sup> In 2009, General Phung Quang Thanh, Vietnamese Defense Minister, paid an official visit to India and a memorandum of understanding (MoU) on defense cooperation was signed. In 2010, shortly after India's Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's visit to Vietnam for the 8<sup>th</sup> India-ASEAN Summit and the 5<sup>th</sup> East Asia Summit, India's Defense Minister A. K. Antony announced that India and Vietnam had agreed to intensify defense cooperation, with measures having been approved when Prime Minister Manmohan Singh had talks with Defense Minister Phung Quang Thanh, Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung and President Nguyen Minh Triet. In particular, India committed to beefing up the Vietnam's defense forces' capabilities with a particular focus on the Vietnamese Navy.<sup>3</sup> In the subsequent years, high level

exchange visits by the leaders of both countries have been intensified. From the Vietnamese side, the high level visits to India include President Truong Tan Sang in 2011, General Secretary of the Communist Party of Vietnam Nguyen Phu Trong in 2013, and Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung in 2012 and 2014. From the Indian side, the high level visits to Vietnam include Vice President Md. Hamid Ansari in 2013, President Pranab Mukherjee in 2014, and most recently, Prime Minister Narendra Modi in 2016.

Of a crucial note in high level bilateral exchange visits for the intensification of defense cooperation is the 2014 visit by Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung and the 2016 visit by Prime Minister Modi. During Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung's visit, India agreed to supply four naval patrol vessels to Vietnam, increase the level of training of its military personnel and raise its involvement in Vietnam's energy sector. The sale of India-Russia co-developed short-range supersonic Brahmos cruise missiles to Vietnam also came under discussion during this visit and concluded that India's entry into the Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR) would legitimize and speed up the process of selling the BrahMos to Vietnam.<sup>4</sup> One month prior to Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung's visit, a joint statement at the conclusion of President Mukherjee's state visit to Vietnam declared "that cooperation in national defense was an important pillar in India-Vietnam strategic partnership." To reinforce this, President Mukherjee announced that the Export-Import Bank of India had signed a \$100 million line of credit agreement to facilitate defense procurement over the next 15 years, along with India's commitment to expansion of military training and assistance to Vietnam Navy's strike capabilities. The strategic aspect of the relationship was again underlined during Prime Minister Modi to Vietnam in 2016. One of the major breakthroughs is the finalization of the agreement for supplying four offshore patrol vessels to Vietnamese military under the framework of the \$100-million line of credit and extension of a \$500 million line of credit to assist Vietnam to procure more military hardware from India. Discussions on the selling of BrahMos missile were also high on the agenda. Notable, India agreed to provide Vietnam with a \$500 million defense loan, which is aimed at boosting defense ties between the two countries and pledged a grant of \$5 million towards the construction of an Army Software Park at the Telecommunications University in Nha Trang.

### ***Annual security dialogue***

In light of the Strategic Partnership, an Annual Security Dialogue at Defense Secretary Level was also institutionalized to provide a substantial channel for enabling greater awareness of security perceptions between the two defense ministries and to reinforce the new momentum of specific defense cooperation programs including effective mechanisms for dialogue, consultation, exchange of experience, information sharing, deal with the security challenges of traditional and non-traditional security issues, and strengthen cooperation in training. Thus far, ten rounds of dialogue have been held, but the noteworthy point is that since the second dialogue in 2008,

<sup>1</sup> Vietnamese Diplomatic Mission, "Vietnam-India Joint Declaration on Strategic Partnership", at [http://www.vietnambassy-brunei.org/vnemb.vn/tin\\_hddn/ns070709100141](http://www.vietnambassy-brunei.org/vnemb.vn/tin_hddn/ns070709100141)

<sup>2</sup> Chris Ogden. (2014). India's foreign policy, Chapter 2 "Strategic Thinking, the Military and Nuclear Affairs", Cambridge: Polity Press, p.38.

<sup>3</sup> Rajeev Sharma, "India to Lift Vietnam Military Ties", The Diplomat (Oct 15, 2010). Available at <http://thediplomat.com/2010/10/india-to-boost-vietnam-military-ties/>

<sup>4</sup> Ankit Panda, "Vietnam May Purchase India's Deadly Supersonic BrahMos Cruise Missile", The Diplomat (June 2, 2016). Available at <http://thediplomat.com/2016/06/vietnam-may-purchase-indias-deadly-supersonic-brahmos-cruise-missile/>

officials from both countries have touched on exchanging views on the South China Sea disputes; these disputes had been rarely mentioned before in bilateral meetings between the two countries. The two sides also discussed bilateral cooperation in all defense-related fields, especially military and security, high-tech, training of human resources and exchanged ways to cement and deepen the Vietnam-India strategic partnership.<sup>5</sup> At the 9<sup>th</sup> Annual Security Dialogue in New Delhi in 2015, defense ministers of both countries signed the Joint Vision Statement on India-Vietnam Defense Relations in the 2015-2020 period under which the two countries will focus on exchanging delegations and training high quality human resources, bringing the defense relation to match the strategic partnership between the two countries, and contributing to maintaining the regional and global peace and stability.

### Naval port visits

One of the principal contributors to bilateral cooperation in the defense sector has been the regular goodwill visits by India naval ships to Vietnamese ports for, among other things, the strengthening of interoperability and maritime cooperation between the Indian Navy and Vietnam's People's Navy. Earlier, these visits were restricted to the port in Ho Chi Minh City. However, over the past five years, Indian ships have anchored at Nha Trang and Da Nang in central Vietnam, at Hai Phong, a port well up in the northern half of the country, and even at Cam Ranh Bay.<sup>6</sup> Thus far there have been some fifteen Indian naval ships docking at Vietnamese ports while a Vietnamese Naval Ship participated in the International Fleet Review at Vishakhapatnam, India for the first time in February 2016. The increasing number of Indian naval ships is partly due to Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung's announcement at the 5<sup>th</sup>

East Asia Summit in Hanoi in later October 2010 about the re-opening of Cam Ranh Bay for all foreign navies on commercial and logistics service purposes, at a time when China was asserting its expansion in the South China Sea.

### Maritime capacity building and training, and assistance

India's enthusiasm to accelerate pace of Vietnam's military training naval capacity building and assistance in maintaining military equipment has obtained remarkable achievements as well. There are a number of Indian training teams to Vietnam in an attempt to assist the Vietnamese Armed Forces in building capacities in Aviation, Information Technologies and English language. In October 2013, India commenced "comprehensive underwater combat operations" training for Vietnamese navy personnel to operate Vietnam's new advanced Kilo-class submarine fleet and committed to training up to 500 Vietnamese submariners in batches of 50 over a year-long program for each batch at its modern submarine training center *INS Satavahana*. In addition, India has been providing Vietnam with pilot training and technical training at Naval Dockyard, School for nursing at Medical Institutions and other professional schools to operate Russian-built Sukhoi fighters. Notable, in his visit to Hanoi in 2016, Prime Minister Modi committed to expanding military training and assisting Vietnam Navy's strike capabilities in order to realize the Joint Vision Statement on India-Vietnam Defense Relations in the 2015-2020. The two countries are also currently discussing the expansion of military training to include pilot training for the Sukhoi Su-30 MK aircraft<sup>7</sup>, along with army-to-army cooperation in training on UN peacekeeping missions. With regard to assistance in maintaining military equipment, India has helped Vietnam maintain the fleet of the Soviet-era MiG-21s and other spares within India's Repair Programs for

**Indian Naval Ship Visits to Vietnamese Ports 2010 - 2016**

Date of visit	Indian Naval Ship	Vietnamese Port
May 2010	INS Ranjit and INS Kulish	Hai Phong
May 2011	INS Delhi and INS Kirch	Ho Chi Minh City
July 2011	INS Airavat	Nha Trang
May 2012	INS Shivalik and INS Karmuk	Hai Phong
January 2013	Sudarshini	Da Nang
June 2013	INS Satpura (F48), INS Shakti (A57), INS Ranvijay (D55) and INS Kirch (P62)	Da Nang
August 2014	INS Shivalik	Hai Phong
October 2015	INS Sahyadri	Da Nang
30 May – 3rd June 2016	INS Satpura and INS Kirch	Cam Ranh Bay

Source: compiled from various sources

<sup>5</sup> Ministry of External Affairs (Government of India), Joint Statement on the State Visit of Prime Minister of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam to India (October 27-28, 2014). Available at [http://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/24142/Joint\\_Statement\\_on\\_the\\_State\\_Visit\\_of\\_Prime\\_Minister\\_of\\_the\\_Socialist\\_Republic\\_of\\_Vietnam\\_to\\_India\\_October\\_2728\\_2014](http://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/24142/Joint_Statement_on_the_State_Visit_of_Prime_Minister_of_the_Socialist_Republic_of_Vietnam_to_India_October_2728_2014)

<sup>6</sup> Cam Ranh Bay was used as one of the largest in-country US military facilities during the Vietnam War (from 1965 to 1973). It is located in Khanh Hoa Province, some 180 miles (290 km) northeast of Ho Chi Minh City. Geopolitically, the Bay is one of the finest deep-water anchorages in Southeast Asia and provides convenient access to the commercially and strategically vital sea lanes that pass through the SCS (the East Sea or Biển Đông Sea in Vietnamese). The port of Nha Trang is located about 40 km north of the Cam Ranh Bay, a strategic position toward the South China Sea. The port of Da Nang, the largest in central Viet Nam today at the mouth of the Han River on the South China Sea. It is officially started construction for the second phase upgrade of Tien Sa Port aiming to make it become a modern container port in the region. The Port of Hai Phong, the second largest port in Vietnam (after the port of Ho Chi Minh), is a natural deepwater port and reputed to be the finest in Southeast Asia, complete with repairs facilities for warships, submarine pens and proximate civilian and military airports.

Vietnam Air Force fighter planes, and improve and digitize some weapons, ammunition, such as ships, aircraft, radar and flak, as well as in technology transfer strategy for naval shipbuilding. The recent visit by India's Defense Minister Manohar Parrikar to Vietnam in June 2016, where he met with the President Tran Dai Quang, Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc and Defense Minister General Ngo Xuan Lich, also focused on the upgrade of the Soviet aging weapon systems, gradation of Thermal Sights and Fire Control Systems for – BMP, T 54 and T 55 Tanks, upgrade of MI 17 / Mi 8 Helicopters, Shipbuilding Programs, Missile Systems from India and Software Defined Radios for Vietnam. There is also

<sup>7</sup> By 2015, Vietnam had possessed a fleet of 36 Russian-manufactured Su-30MK2 fighter jets and it seems that India will help train Vietnamese pilots to operate Russian-built Sukhoi fighters.

a high possibility that India will support spares and maintain Vietnam-owned Su 27 and Su 30 aircraft.<sup>8</sup>

### *Arms transfer*

The past decade also marked a milestone in India's arms transfer to Vietnam. In his visit to Hanoi shortly after the establishment of the strategic partnership, Indian Defense Minister A.K. Antony announced at a meeting with his counterpart General Phung Quang Thanh that India would transfer 5,000 items of naval spares belonging to the Petya class of ships to Vietnam. Since September 2014, New Delhi and Hanoi has held talks for supply of India-Russia co-developed short-range supersonic Brahmos cruise missiles while Moscow has already informally given its nod to New Delhi for supply of the missiles to Vietnam. The deal was reported in the final stages.<sup>9</sup> In early 2015, the Kolkata-base defense PSU Garden Reach Shipbuilders and Engineers Ltd (GRSE) finalized the design of a series of 140-tonne fast patrol boats for the Vietnamese Navy. It is interesting to learn that this was the first time an Indian shipyard has been commissioned to design and build a warship to specifications formulated by a buyer country. It was reported that Vietnam is set to get at least 10 new patrols from India under the line of credit route, along with a contract for at least 10 new interceptors to be built by Larson & Toubro Limited (L&T). In a talk between Vietnam's Defense Minister General Ngo Xuan Lich and his counterpart Manohar Parrikar at the event of the latter's visit to Hanoi in June 2016, both sides highlighted the bid document by Vietnam Border Guards and L&T, and the Indian defense minister stated that he desired Indian private sector to lead the initiative, explore and actively participate in Vietnamese modernization of defense forces. This will not just strengthen the diplomatic and military bond between the two countries but also open the doors of strategic exports. At the meeting, both sides also discussed the possible sale of high speed heavy weight torpedo "Varunastra" designed for both anti-submarine and surface ships operations.<sup>10</sup> Hanoi is also currently partnering with New Delhi to build a jointly operated satellite data transmission station. In the last few years, Vietnam has acquired 2 Varshavyanka class submarines, 2 Yugo class SSI, 2 Frigates, 6 Corvettes, 8 Tarantul class Corvettes, 54 Patrol and Coastal Combatants, 8 amphibious ships, 30 landing crafts, 13 Mine Warfare and Countermeasures and 29 Logistics and Support mechanisms, along with various other naval defense technology and hardware from Russia, North Korea and Israel.<sup>11</sup> Among the

arms sellers, India has remained the second largest supplier of military equipment and strategic weapons to Vietnam, just after Russia.

### **Factors behind the deepening of Vietnam-India Defense Cooperation**

Neorealist advocates posited that Vietnam's deepening of its military relations with India, along with its ASEAN membership and rapprochement with the United States in recent years, has been to serve the strategic objective of countering Chinese assertiveness in the SCS disputes and of discouraging China's expansionism. This contention lies in the assumption that China remains as a threat for Vietnam and has emerged as a new source of threat to the whole Southeast Asia region since the 1990s, driving Vietnam and the ASEAN countries that have "common problem" with China to pursue a balancing act against this regional giant by accelerating pace of military ties with other major powers.<sup>12</sup> However, neorealist approach on Vietnam's strengthened defense ties with India presents puzzles and shortcomings, both theoretically and empirically. It is undeniable that the China factor looms large in Vietnam-India's defense cooperation in the past decade; this new trajectory in the two countries' relations needs to be considered in broader context.

### *Traditionally friendly and cordial relations as a sound foundation*

Vietnam-India long-standing friendly and trusted relations have laid a sound ground for the increasingly deepening defense cooperation. During wartime, both nations had their historical roots in the common struggle for liberation from foreign rule and the national struggle for independence. Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru was one of the first visitors to Vietnam after its victory against the French in 1954. President Ho Chi Minh visited India in 1958 on state visit during which Nehru considered Ho Chi Minh as "a great revolutionary and an almost legendary hero". Throughout the Cold War period, both India and Vietnam maintained close ties with the Soviet Union and their shared reliance on Warsaw Pact military hardware remains a powerful bond two decades after the dissolution of the USSR. In the various joint communiqués that have evolved between Indian and Vietnamese leadership, strengthening of peace and stability of the region has been stressed upon. For instance, the then External Affairs Minister (and later Prime Minister) Narasimha Rao stated clearly that India and Vietnam have to pave an avenue for a lasting peace without abandoning principles. On the same lines, Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi pointed out that both the nations should have the flexibility of mind and spirit which enabled the nations to recognize new challenges and work up befitting responses, stressing that "Vietnam is a true and sincere friend of India with whom we enjoy ... many shared geopolitical perceptions. We have established a strong political

<sup>8</sup> "Parrikar holds talks with Vietnamese President, Prime Minister and Defence Minister", The Indian Express, June 6, 2016. Available at <http://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-news-india/manohar-parrikar-vietnam-president-prime-defence-minister-military-india-2838016/>

<sup>9</sup> Anirban Bhaumik (2014), "India plans to supply Vietnam BrahMos missiles", Deccan Herald, Sep 12, 2014, at <http://www.deccanherald.com/content/430576/india-plans-supply-vietnam-brahmos.html>; Manu Pubby (2016), "India firming up military ties with Vietnam", The Economic Times, July 2, 2016. Available at <http://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/india-firming-up-military-ties-with-vietnam/articleshow/53014998.cms>

<sup>10</sup> Ibid

<sup>11</sup> Carlyle Thayer, "Vietnam's Maritime forces", Presentation to Conference on Recent Trends in the South China Sea and U.S. Policy, Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington, D.C., July 10-11, 2014, <http://www.iacspsea.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/Vietnams-Maritime-Forces-July-10-2014.pdf>; Muhammad ZulfikarRakhmat, "Vietnam: Israel's closest ASEAN partner", New Mandala, December 04, 2015, <http://www.newmandala.org/vietnam-israels-closest-asean-partner/>; Japan - Vietnam Joint Statement on the Establishment of the Extensive Strategic

Partnership for Peace and Prosperity in Asia, March 2014, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, <http://www.mofa.go.jp/files/000031617.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> Denny Roy, "Southeast Asia and China: Balancing or Bandwagoning?" Contemporary Southeast Asia 27(2), August 2005; Alexander L. Vuving, "Strategy and evolution of Vietnam's China policy: A changing mixture of pathways" Asian Survey, 46(6), 2006; Jörn Dosch, "India and Vietnam: What behind closer rapprochement", Contemporary Southeast Asia 28(2), 2011.

understanding that will strengthen and safeguard the forces of peace and stability in Asia".<sup>13</sup>

In the aftermath of the Cold War as India pursued its 'Look East' policy, Vietnam became one of the most important pillars in its Southeast Asian regional engagement. Politically, Vietnam was a viable option for Indian decision makers as the other neighbors had little converging interests with New Delhi, for example, Myanmar was under a strong military junta, while Cambodia and Laos had strict communist regimes; India had close economic and strategic links with Singapore, while Thailand's closer ties with China. This context has instigated India to build a closer link with the nation, and Vietnam, after Doi Moi (Renovation) in 1986, had reformed its economic policies in a manner which smoothed the way for international economic, defense and strategic collaborations with India. During Prime Minister Narasimha Rao's visit to Vietnam in 1994, India and Vietnam signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) on Defense Cooperation and with this development, Vietnam was one of the first countries in Southeast Asian region which signed defense arrangement with India. Since then India has been supplying ammunition, propellants, MiG tyres spares and Silver Oxide aircraft batteries.<sup>14</sup> During Indian Defense Minister George Fernandes's visit to Vietnam in 2000, agreements were signed between Vietnam and India on strategic issues like: joint naval training; joint anti-sea piracy exercises in the South China Sea; jungle warfare training; counter-insurgency training; Air Force pilots training in India; India's Repair Programmes for Vietnam Air Force fighter planes (MIGs). The strongly trusted relations between Hanoi and New Delhi was further strengthened in May 2003 as both sides signed the "Joint Declaration on the Comprehensive Cooperation Framework", which included commitments to regular high-level meetings, close cooperation in international fora and gradual steps to expand cooperation in security and defense. This framework laid a sound ground for both countries to upgrade the bilateral relations to the strategic partnership in 2007 within which defense cooperation is identified to play a vital role in Vietnam-India strategic partnership. Besides, India and Vietnam have been closely cooperating in various regional arrangements, such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), East Asia Summit, Mekong-Ganga Cooperation, and ASEAN Defense Ministerial Meeting Plus (ADMM+), and the United Nations peacekeeping missions. With the passage of more than 60 years of Vietnam-India relations of close amity, the deepening of Vietnam-India defense cooperation presents an indispensable result. Accordingly, the strategic partnership between Vietnam and India is based on 'traditional friendship, mutual understanding, strong trust, support and convergence of views on various regional and international issues.'<sup>15</sup> Indian President Pranab Mukherjee even described that 'political relations between India and Vietnam have always been strong and cloudless.' This is the most important foundation for strategic cooperation between the two countries in all fields, particularly in defense dimension.

### ***Converging interests***

The past decade marks the emergence of Vietnam-India defense relations. This new momentum is primarily based on both states' shared strategic calculations for a greater role to play in the Asia-Pacific region and the catalyst of the China factor.

### ***Seeking a greater role to play in the region***

The first converging interest behind the acceleration of Vietnam-India defense cooperation lies in both countries' shared strategic view on a greater role to play and further engagement in the region. For the Indian side, around the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, given the swiftly changing security dynamics in the region, India began implementing what has since been called "Phase 2" of its Look East Policy, which would include a more direct strategic engagement in East Asia. This resulted in the evolution into broader security and defense ties across East Asia, with India signaling its willingness to play a greater strategic role in the region. Notably, since his entry into power in 2014, Prime Minister Narendra Modi rechristened the approach as the 'Act East' policy, with the focus and objectives of building economic, institutional and defense links with the entire Asia-Pacific region. Danielle Rajendram, India expert at the Sydney-based Lowy Institute contends that what lies at the core of the 'Act East' policy under the Modi-led government is to pursue a greater and more ambitious role in the Asia-Pacific in line with the country's growing economic and strategic interests, stating the importance of seeking deeper ties with partners such as Japan, Vietnam, ASEAN, South Korea and Australia.<sup>16</sup> In this new policy trajectory, the deepening of its military ties with Vietnam is among India's best options, for a simple reason that Vietnam has long been regarded by New Delhi as a trusted and privileged strategic partner, and an important pillar of its regional policy.

Moreover, since Vietnam gained its membership card in ASEAN in 1995, Vietnam has played an active role and contributed to the development and expansion of ASEAN's prestige and East Asian regional cooperation arrangements as well as its close relationships with the aforementioned important partners of India. Thus, New Delhi is in desperately need of Vietnam's support for its regional engagement and a role to play in Southeast Asia, and more broadly, in East Asia, especially in defense and security dimension for regional peace and stability. This is evidenced as during a recent trip to Vietnam, India's External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj stated the Modi government preferred to act on its eastward policy as opposed to "just looking east," adding that Vietnam would have an enormous role to play.<sup>17</sup> Not surprisingly, a steadily expanding economy, paired with a growing partnership with key regional actors including Vietnam and an increasingly capable Navy, positions India to have an impact on the emerging security architecture of the Asia-Pacific. Facts show that India's presence and engagement in East Asia has

<sup>13</sup> Government of India, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Rajiv Gandhi Statements on Foreign Policy, April-June 1988, (New Delhi, 1988), p.9.

<sup>14</sup> C. Ravindranatha Reddy (2009), *India and Vietnam: Era of Friendship and Cooperation 1947-1991*, New Delhi, Emerald Publishers, Chennai, p. 71.

<sup>15</sup> "Joint Statement between India and Vietnam during the visit of Prime Minister to Vietnam", Ministry of External Affairs, the Government of India (September 03, 2016).

<sup>16</sup> Interviewer Gabriel Domínguez, "From 'Look East' to 'Act East' – India shifts focus", Deutsche Welle (19 December, 2014), at <http://www.dw.com/en/from-look-east-to-act-east-india-shifts-focus/a-18141462>

<sup>17</sup> "Indian Foreign Affairs Minister Meets Vietnamese Officials", Reuters (25 August, 2014).

been elevated partly thanks to Vietnam's active endorsement. Hanoi has over and over again raised voice to support India's Act East Policy. In 2005, Hanoi bolstered New Delhi to engage in the East Asia Summit and, as a result, India became the member of this regional arrangement though it is not a country in East Asia, geographically. With Vietnam's support, India also gained a membership card in the ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting Plus (ADMM+) which was held for the first time in Vietnam in 2010. Also, India is now, along with other nations as members of EAS, negotiating to conclude the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) whose negotiations were formally launched in November 2012. In addition, by calling for expansion of the UN Security Council, Hanoi has always favored India for a permanent membership card in this international security mechanism.

For the Vietnamese side, bidding for a greater role and position has been driven in its foreign policy since the entry of the new century, and India emerges as an important pillar in this strategy. Vietnam's long-standing foreign policy is based on operation of multilateralization and diversification of international relations. Within this policy trajectory, Vietnam not only strengthens relations with India, but with other major powers, such as Japan, the United States, China and Russia. Among this key security partners, however, India remains the most important partner, for a number of strategic calculations in search for its greater role in the swiftly changing security dynamics in the region. First, in Hanoi's view, the acceleration of defense cooperation with India, the country that is not just geographically close, but also traditionally friendly and cordial with Vietnam, will be of great significance to strengthen its defense capabilities in line with the country's recent economic development. This is a crucial factor to enhance Vietnam's prestige and position on the regional and global stages. India is one of the largest arms markets in the world and owns a relatively developed defense industry. Thus, arms purchase from New Delhi will assist Vietnam in diversifying arms imports to stay less dependent on Russia the country that has long been the predominant arms supplier to Vietnam but at the same time has arms sales with its northern giant China. In addition, with its large inventory of Soviet weapons and indigenous defense industry, India seems to be a good source of weapons and training. Also, India has a lot of experience in the operation and integration of weapons systems with different origins. This is a desperately necessary condition for Vietnam's People's Army to step up procurement of weapons from sources other than Russian weapons in the future. Moreover, strengthening defense cooperation with India will enable Vietnam to get access to new but affordable defense technologies. Indian weapons development programs are very diverse as the country cooperates with Russia, the US, France and Israel in many joint projects. Second, with India's recent extensive engagement in the region thanks to Vietnam's endorsement, it is the right time for Hanoi to boost its defense cooperation with New Delhi in search for a greater role and position in multilateral regional arrangements and in regional peace and stability. Vietnam has closely cooperated with India in various regional forums such as ASEAN, East Asia Summit, Mekong-Ganga Cooperation, ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), ADMM+, besides the UN Security Council. At ASEAN-initiated regional and international fora, India has actively supported Vietnam in strategic political issues. Also, both countries, along with other ASEAN partners, have worked closely to deal with nontraditional security uncertainties,

among other things, including resource scarcity, natural disasters, people smuggling, drug trafficking, and transnational crime, and counter-piracy by joint military exercises.

### *The China factor*

Another striking factor behind the recent acceleration of Vietnam-India defense cooperation is the China factor. As for New Delhi, China has emerged as a competitor and posed challenges to India's regional strategic interests and national security. Over some past two decades, China has expanded its encroachment into India's strategic locations for the energy sector. Beijing is desperate to secure hydrocarbon resources for its expanding economy. For that strategy, it has beaten India in head-to-head competition for oil assets in Kazakhstan, Ecuador, and Nigeria. Thus, China's efforts to secure its access to overseas energy resources have brought it into India's backyard because oil from East Africa and the Persian Gulf must cross the Indian Ocean to make its way to the market in China. Furthermore, in an effort to secure its interests, China has helped establish a network of ports and partnerships with countries in the littoral region—including several nations that have traditionally been hostile to India.<sup>18</sup> Indian observers frequently suggest that the goal of this so-called "string of pearls" strategy is to secure access to locations that could be used to project Chinese power into the Indian Ocean, thus posing challenges to India's national security and to its vested interests in the Indian Ocean. Facts show that China has been very active in this region over almost the past two decades. To the west of India, China financed the construction of a major port complex for Pakistan at Gwadar, which some analysts presume will be used by the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) to gain a strategic position in the Arabian Sea, close to the mouth of the Persian Gulf.<sup>19</sup> To the east, the Chinese military has reportedly assisted Burma with the construction of several naval facilities on the Bay of Bengal – particularly at Kyaukpyu and Hainggyi Island.<sup>20</sup> To the south, China recently reached an agreement to develop a port project for Sri Lanka at Hambantota on the island's south coast. Furthermore, China has been a principal supplier of weapons technology, both conventional and nuclear, to Pakistan—India's South Asian *bête noire*. China's support for Pakistan, as well as its encroachment into the Indian Ocean, is viewed by some as part of a coherent strategy to encircle India and confine its influence to South Asia. These concerns are accompanied by apprehension over the PLAN's on-going expansion, which is viewed as a possible threat to India's strategic interests in the region.<sup>21</sup> Not surprisingly, India's Foreign Minister recently described the rise of China as one of India's foremost security challenges.

<sup>18</sup> Walter C. Lagwig III, "Delhi's Pacific Ambition: Naval Power, 'Look East,' and India's Emerging Influence in the Asia-Pacific", *Asian Security*, Vol. 5, No. 2, 2009, Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, p. 89.

<sup>19</sup> Tarique Niazi, "Gwadar: China's Naval Outpost on the Indian Ocean," *China Brief* Vol. 5, No. 4 (February 14, 2005); and Sudha Ramachandran, "China's Pearl in Pakistan's Waters," *Asia Times*, March 4, 2005.

<sup>20</sup> Gurmeet Kanwal, "Countering China's Strategic Encirclement of India," *Indian Defence Review* Vol. 15, No. 3 (July–September 2000), p. 13; and C. S. Kuppuswamy, "Myanmar–China Cooperation: Its Implications for India," *South Asia Analysis Group*, February 3, 2003.

<sup>21</sup> James Holmes and Toshi Yoshihara, "China's Naval Ambitions in the Indian Ocean," *Journal of Strategic Studies* Vol. 31, No. 3 (June 2008), pp. 388–391.

For the part of Vietnam, China's increasing assertiveness in the South China Sea (SCS) became the most acute concern. In late 2007, China established the city of Sansha to administer the Paracel and Spratly Islands (and the submerged reef of Macclesfield Bank). In 2009, China sent the United National its official map of the SCS, showing the enigmatic "nine-dotted-line" or "U-shaped line" to claim over 80% of the region as under its "indisputable sovereignty." In January 2010, China decided to establish local governing bodies in the Paracel Islands and to develop the islands' tourism industry. In addition, senior Chinese officials once even put the SCS into its "core national interest" category of non-negotiable territorial claims along with Taiwan and Tibet. This implied that China was entitled to defend its national interests in the SCS at all costs, including the use of force. Later, China published the "2010–20 Grand Plan for Construction and Development for the International Tourism Island of Hainan," in which the Paracel and Spratly Islands would be incorporated in an oceanic multi-purpose complex under the management of the province of Hainan, air and sea tourist routes bound for the Paracel Islands would be enhanced, and registration for the right to use uninhabited islands would be encouraged. To strengthen the basis for the legal enforcement of its claims, the Chinese authorities took a wide range of measures to assert their de facto control over the SCS. First, China conducted occasional military exercises in the disputed area to send deterrent signals to other claimants.<sup>22</sup> The frequency and coordination level of Chinese military exercises have increased in recent years.<sup>23</sup> Second, China intensified pressure on international firms and corporations to withdraw oil and gas exploitation projects from Vietnam, even though their projects were being conducted within the sovereign and jurisdictional rights of the country.<sup>24</sup> At the same time, Beijing expanded its deployment of deep sea drilling oil rig in Vietnam's continental shelf, notably the case of its HD-981 into Vietnamese waters south of the Paracel Islands in 2014. Third, China extended its encroachment on Vietnam's continental shelf and deliberately damaged Vietnam's seismic survey

ships. From 2010, China used the survey vessel M/V *Western Spirit* and many escort ships to conduct seismic drill tests in Vietnam's continental shelf, not to mention Chinese patrol ships' cutting of Vietnam's seismic survey cable within its 200-nautical-mile continental shelf. Fourth, every year, China imposes its unilateral fishing ban in the SCS for two months, usually in June and July, the peak of the fishing season, and deploys a number of renovated warships as patrol vessels to chase, collide with, and sink small Vietnamese fishing boats.<sup>25</sup> Notably, over the past couple of years, China has transformed spare reefs and rocks in the disputed Spratly archipelago into islands large enough to boast sports fields and airplane runways. According to the U.S. Department of Defense's annual report to Congress China has fashioned at least 3,200 acres of new land in the Spratlys over the past couple of years.<sup>26</sup> As the China factor comes to the fore as a threat to Vietnam's national sovereignty and security, Hanoi develops its self-help approach—that is, strengthening its defense capabilities with major powers to a new level as a way of deterring its northern giant from using force and safeguarding Vietnam's vital maritime economic and strategic interests. It is therefore not surprising that Hanoi's enthusiasm for accelerating defense and security cooperation with New Delhi in all the aforementioned areas, particularly in maritime capacity building, came at a time when China revised its maritime territorial claims in line with the increasingly assertive and provocative posture to the SCS since 2007. In similar fashion, both countries have cooperated effectively in countering nontraditional maritime security, particularly at/around oil blocks where India's oil and gas groups have been conducting resources within Vietnam's 200 nautical miles of the exclusive economic zone and continental shelf in the SCS. Notably, for the past couple of years, Hanoi has demonstrated its strong interests to invite India to intensify its exploitation of maritime natural resources in Vietnam's EEZ and continental shelf in the SCS where China has many times deployed fighter jets and surface-to-air missiles to the consternation of other countries.

<sup>22</sup> Tran Truong Thuy, "Recent Developments in the South China Sea: Unconstrained Waves of Tensions," *International Studies*, 24 (June 2011) p. 39.

<sup>23</sup> In the middle of 2010, China conducted a military exercise in the SCS. In June the following year, it conducted daytime and night-time military exercises in the disputed area, involving a total of 14 Navy patrol boats, landing craft, and submarine hunting boats, along with two military aircraft (See more detail at [http://newsinfo.inquirer.net/15864/china-holds-3-day-military-exercises-near-spratlys]). In October 2012, two Chinese naval fleets conducted joint military exercises in the SCS to test emergency combat capabilities

[http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/china/9632972/Chinese-naval-fleets-conduct-joint-military-drills-in-the-South-China-Sea.html].

<sup>24</sup> In June 2007, after Chinese pressure over its gas pipeline construction project, British Petroleum (BP Inc.) decided to halt exploration projects in the gas fields of Moc Tinh and Hai Thach on continental shelf of Vietnam (Block 5.2, between the coast and the Spratly Islands of Vietnam, about 370 km offshore). In the middle of 2008, Chinese diplomats in the US repeatedly opposed Exxon Mobile and publicly threatened retaliation against the company in mainland China if it continued to cooperate with PetroVietnam in oil and gas exploration and exploitation projects in offshore areas near the central and southern part of Vietnam. Between 2008 and 2010, China frequently protested other exploration activities conducted by international energy companies within Vietnam's EEZ and continental shelf, such as BP in Block 117, PGS (Norway) in Block 122, Chevron (US) in Block 122, Pogo (US) in Block 124, ONGC (India) in Block 127, Indemisu (Japan) in Block 04-3, CoconoPhilips (US) in Block 133, Pearl Energy (UK) in Block 06-1, Knoc (South Korea) in Block 11-4, and Gazprom (Russia) in Blocks 111 and 113 (data provided by Prof. Nguyen Chu Hoi, General Administrator of Seas and Islands, Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment, Hanoi, 27 July 2012).

Vietnam-India converging interest vis-à-vis the China factor has also demonstrated in multilateral regional security forums. For Vietnam's side, it is understandable that its statements regarding the SCS issues with China cannot be blunt as Hanoi is sensitive and cautious in its voices against Beijing at regional forums; however, Hanoi's leaders are tactful to mobilize the support for its stance from the great and major powers, especially the United States, India, and Japan. For India's side, it has always openly raised its voice to support Vietnam and called on the involved parties to apply and comply with international law, namely the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) in solving the SCS disputes the stance viewed by Hanoi as the first priority. Also, India has stated its clear viewpoints of the SCS disputes in favor of Vietnam, including: (1) affirming that China's nine-dashed line map in the SCS is illegal; (2) supporting to solve the disputes through peaceful means in accordance with universally recognized principles of international law; (3) raising voice to protect freedom of

<sup>25</sup> Do Thanh Hai, "In Retrospect of China's Policy toward South China Sea Disputes since 2007," *International Studies*, 24 (June 2011), p. 139.

<sup>26</sup> Hannah Beech, "What's New on China's Artificial Islands in the South China Sea?" *Time* (22 May, 2016).

Available at <http://time.com/4341510/south-china-sea-artificial-islands/>

navigation and over flights in the SCS; (4) supporting to solve the disputes internationally; (5) continuing with its oil and gas exploration in blocks offered by Vietnam; and (6) ready to deploy naval force in the SCS to protect India's interests if its interests are threatened.

### The Way ahead

Looking ahead, Vietnam-India strategic partnership will develop in a more comprehensive and authentic manner in the years to come thanks to the momentum that both countries have built up for the past decade. In that way, there should be no impediments for Hanoi and New Delhi to build up closer ties with a vigorous focus on defense and security, not to mention the new momentum in political, diplomatic, and economic fields. This is evidenced that on the occasion of his official friendship visit to Vietnam in mid-2016, Indian Minister of Defense Manohar Parrikar and Vietnamese Minister of National Defense Ngo Xuan Lich agreed that bilateral defense cooperation should be further promoted in depth according to the agreements on defense cooperation and the vision to 2020, focusing on exchange of visits, experience sharing, high-quality human resource training, and Naval and Air Force cooperation in particular, making the defense relation correspond to the two countries' relations for mutual benefits, contributing to maintaining peace, stability, and development in the region and in the world as a whole. Moreover, during his recent visit to Vietnam to upgrade bilateral diplomatic relations to comprehensive strategic partnership from strategic partnership, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi once again affirmed India's commitment to enhancing defense industry cooperation with Vietnam and would provide financial assistance to Vietnam to implement cooperation projects in this field. Also, the relations between the two militaries have been strengthened on the basis of political trust and common stance on regional and international issues. That is a sound ground to help Vietnam-India defense cooperation develop vigorously, bringing about more pragmatic outcomes in the coming time. A convergence of strategic interests that both countries enjoy will be the principal catalyst, however. On the path of India, in the course of seeking a greater role to play in East Asia within the scope of its "Act East" policy, Vietnam will be an active entity for India's regional political, diplomatic and economic engagement, and for the safeguarding of its maritime economic and strategic interests in particular.

In return, Vietnam will make best use of its traditionally close relations with India and the current momentum of bilateral partnership to elevate its defense cooperation in depth with New Delhi as a way of enhancing its national position and prestige in the regional and international issues, especially in the fields of nontraditional and traditional security. With regard to the China factor in the calculus of India, China has created the Pakistani threat (nuclear and missile threat)<sup>27</sup> and expanded its power into the Indian Ocean, impinging on India's security and its national security interests, not to mention the existing unsolved bilateral border disputes. In the

case of Vietnam, China has posed a serious security threat to the SCS territorial claims of Vietnam. This reality pushes both Hanoi and New Delhi into a convergence of strategic concerns, thereby having a shared natural strategic congruence to restrain China from aggressive actions in the future. In this sense, it is envisioned that India tends to focus on the transfer of military hardware, especially in the maritime security domain to Vietnam. For Vietnam's expectation, it will work on speeding up the process of purchasing India-Russia co-developed short-range supersonic Brahmos cruise missiles and call on India to intensify Vietnam's military training naval capacity building and to assist the Vietnamese Armed Forces in building capacities in Aviation and Information Technologies as well as in maintaining/upgrading Soviet-era spares, along with India's technology transfer for naval shipbuilding and provision of patrol vessels to enhance the capacity of Vietnam's coastal patrol units for deterrence of China's power penetration into the SCS and for search and rescue, disaster response, and other activities. In addition, Hanoi is more likely to provide a prioritized room for New Delhi to increase the number of its port visits to Vietnam's strategic areas, including the Cam Ranh Bay. The two militaries will also bolster visit exchanges to realize the signed agreements on defense cooperation and the 2020 Joint Vision Statement outlining a road map for increased defense collaboration. It is also likely that Vietnam will find ways to intensify India's exploitation of maritime natural resources within Vietnam's 200-nauticalmile EEZ and continental shelf in the SCS. It should not be left unmentioned that although the China factor weighs heavily and figures prominently in the respective strategic calculus of both India and Vietnam, both countries tend not to attempt to establish alliance relations to counterweigh against China as in realist view. Rather, both New Delhi and Hanoi pursue a flux of strategies to cope with China. In the case of India, although China accounts for a major portion in strategic calculus of New Delhi in terms of both national security concerns and competition for regional power, New Delhi has sought, and could continue in medium term, to engage China in all realms. To put it precisely, economic cooperation and enhanced political ties benefit both nations: bilateral trade between the two Asian giants stands at nearly \$50 billion per year, mounting to \$65 in 2016, according to *The Economic Times*.<sup>28</sup>

On the political front, having fully normalized relations in 2003, Beijing entered into what it calls a "Strategic and Cooperative Partnership for Peace and Prosperity" with New Delhi in 2005. This latter development signals an important upgrade in relations between the two countries, and a sign that Chinese officials recognize India will become a significant Asian power.<sup>29</sup> Additionally, the two nations share a desire to see the international sphere transition to a multi-polar structure in which each country has an increased voice in global affairs. Military relations between the two neighbors have also steadily improved, with an agreement in 2006 to begin undertaking joint military exercises, as well as high-level exchanges between their respective armed forces.<sup>30</sup> In case of

<sup>27</sup> China has been a principal supplier of weapons technology, both conventional and nuclear, to Pakistan, India's South Asian bête noire. In July 2007, Beijing deepened this "all-weather friendship" when it signed a free trade agreement with Islamabad. In Walter C. Ladwig III (2009), "Delhi's Pacific Ambition: Naval Power, "Look East," and India's Emerging Influence in the Asia-Pacific", *Asian Security*, 5:2

<sup>28</sup> Available at <http://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/economy/foreign-trade/india-china-trade-to-touch-65-billion-in-2016/articleshow/55963959.cms>

<sup>29</sup> Stephen J. Blank, "Natural Allies? Regional Security in Asia and Prospects for Indo-American Strategic Cooperation" (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2005), p. 66.

<sup>30</sup> "Memorandum of Understanding Between the Ministry of Defense of the Republic of India and the Ministry



Vietnam, the country has long pursued a communication of three key approaches toward its neighboring giant. The first approach is to develop the “defensive hedge,” which involves Vietnam’s enhanced defense interactions with the ASEAN’s major security partners—the US, India, Japan, and Russia—to hedge against the threat posed by China. The second approach is enmeshment: seeking to enmesh China within the ASEAN-centric multilateral political and security institutions, alongside an ASEAN-China FTA and other sub-regional arrangements, at the same time cooperating with ASEAN and China in an attempt to conclude a regional Code of Conduct among the involved parties in the SCS (COC) as a legally binding mechanism to enmesh its northern giant. The third approach is engagement: engaging China in a web of party-to-party, state-to-state, and military-to-military exchanges in order to manage and codify bilateral relations.

### Conclusion

Since the wake of the strategic partnership that Vietnam and India elevated in 2007, bilateral cooperation in all realms has been remarkably strengthened. Although the new level of partnership presents both sides’ enthusiasm to enhance bilateral commercial engagement and to tap into the growing regional economic opportunities as the strategic objective, the security domain has always been on the fore. The momentum primarily focuses on New Delhi’s assistance in building and training Vietnam’s maritime capacity as well as maintaining military equipment, arms transfer and naval port visits to Vietnam, alongside bilateral cooperation in combating maritime nontraditional security issues and high-level exchange visits, including annual security dialogue mechanism to enable greater shared awareness of security perceptions and to reinforce the momentum of specific defense cooperation programs. The new trajectory of Vietnam-India defense cooperation presents an indispensable outcome as both countries have enjoyed the longstanding extremely friendly and cordial relationships and as both sides have engaged in a wide web of regional cooperation arrangements. However, the new momentum of partnership is primarily built up by a wide area of the shared strategic calculus. In the first place, facilitating deeper bilateral defense cooperation demonstrates their converging strategic view on a greater role to play and further engagement in the region. This calculus comes into play as both countries realize that the turn of the new millennium presents a complex strategic environment in Asia-Pacific which poses the emerging regional challenges to both nontraditional and traditional security. This new context involves both sides’ deeper and authentic engagement and contribution to the regional peace and security, and in that way, both countries could project their influence and position on the regional and global stages. In addition, the new momentum of bilateral defense ties lie in the strategic calculus of mutual benefits and interdependence which reap extensively at a time when India implemented “Phase 2” of its ‘Look East’ policy and subsequently transformed the character of its ‘Look East’ policy into ‘Act East’ policy within which India desperately needs Vietnam’s active endorsement for its further regional engagement, and when Vietnam finds India desperately vital for the strengthening of its defense capacities in line with its growing economic and strategic interests.

Another striking converging strategic calculation of the deepening cooperation in the security domain between the two countries is the China factor. China’s encroachment into the India Ocean to pursue its “string of pearls” strategy and to encircle India as well as to project its influence in South Asia by utilizing its close friends and allies, principally Pakistan—India’s South Asian *bête noire* as a buffer zone has, taken together, impinged seriously on India’s maritime economic, strategic interests and national security. Likewise, China’s extensive penetration of its power into the SCS within Vietnam’s 200-nauticalmile EEZ and continental shelf, along with the former’s wide range of aggressive and provocative action to assert their *de facto* control over the SCS under its nine-dash-line territorial claims, has become the most acute cause of threat to Vietnam and, to a lesser extent, to India as well due to its view of the SCS as the major sea lanes of communication to the Indian Ocean. This dilemma induced both New Delhi and Hanoi into unprecedented rapprochement in the security domain to curb the Asian giant.

It is much likely that the present momentum of Vietnam-India comprehensive strategic partnership will make defense cooperation a prominent pillar in the years to come. Among the converging strategic calculations, the China factor may loom large. Facts show that despite many of the regional medium-power countries pursue a flux of strategies to address their relations with the Asian giant: deference, engagement and enmeshment, alongside the hedging strategy. Vietnam has long followed suit as well, while India pursues a mix of both engagement and hedging strategies *vis-à-vis* China. Against this background, China’s ambition to become the regional hub, if not the global hegemonic power, could drive Vietnam and India into a calculus to develop the hedging strategy as the first priority.

Vietnam’s changing posture toward China in the past decade suggests that Hanoi will continue to pursue its defensive hedging behavior to new heights as China’s assertiveness in the SCS and its growing regional power make it Vietnam’s biggest threat. In this regard, Vietnam will likely move closer to the US and to its allies, principally Japan, and its close friends including India. It is no surprise that other ASEAN states, such as Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, and the Philippines, are also pursuing this strategy because their neighboring giant has exerted its growing regional power, based on its formidable economic strength, growing military might, and regional influence, despite the economic gains offered by the emergence of China as an economic powerhouse. As Takashi Shiraishi (2012) observes, “The states in its [China’s] vicinity certainly want to gain from its economic rise, but as soon as they feel threatened by China, they align themselves with the USA and its allies.”<sup>31</sup> In the case of Vietnam, there might be an “alignment” with India, or the US, but this new rapprochement very much depends on China’s policy adjustments. If China is increasingly aggressive in the SCS, anti-Chinese nationalist sentiments in Vietnam will increase, and Vietnam may lean toward some major power to provide a counterweight to China. However, this scenario is unlikely because there remain a number of limitations on Hanoi. In the first place, it would be detrimental to Vietnam’s long-standing diversified and multidirectional foreign policy

and its 'Three-Nos' defense diplomacy.<sup>32</sup> Such an alignment would thus jeopardize its diplomatic identity and any "non-intervention" principle. Second, Vietnam has been quite circumspect about the possibility of a fierce reaction from China should it move closer to any major or great powers, principally the United States, India, or Japan militarily. Third, there is a general perception among the Vietnamese who learned from the past experience during the Cold War that forming alliance or alignment relations could be at the expense of smaller states like Vietnam as the 'big powers' could sacrifice their interests in smaller states in exchange for greater strategic interests between themselves. For these reasons, there should be increased enhancement of Vietnam's defense relations with India as part of its soft-balancing strategy vis-à-vis China, but at a level that accommodates all the above-mentioned calculations.

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<sup>32</sup> Since the end of the Cold War, Hanoi's defense diplomacy has been consistent to "Three-Nos" principle: no military alliances, no foreign military bases on Vietnamese territory, and no reliance on any country to combat others.