

INDIA-VIETNAM TIES, FROM STRONG TO STRONGER

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: Effect of policies and politics of developed & developing countries on India's interests

'India's relations with Vietnam — some of which is based on a set of historical commonalities — predate any conflict between India and China as well as that between China and Vietnam' |

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India and Vietnam are celebrating the 50th anniversary of their diplomatic relations. Bolstering friendship between the two countries is a natural outcome of a growing convergence of their strategic and economic interests, and also their common vision for peace, prosperity and their people. A strong commitment of political leadership along with the necessary institutional frameworks and cooperation between the two countries is likely to be more robust in the future. More importantly, embedding a flexible framework of engagement can contribute positively to regional stability and prosperity.

India is essentially a maritime nation and the oceans hold the key to India's future. India's external trade (over 90% by volume and 70% by value) is by sea. Very dependent on the seas for its trade and commerce, India has intensified its efforts to engage with maritime neighbours, including Vietnam.

India's relations with Vietnam — some of which is based on a set of historical commonalities — predate any conflict between India and China as well as that between China and Vietnam. The strategic dimensions of Indo-Vietnamese relations, initiated during the 1980s, began unfolding in the form of structured and institutional arrangements during the 1990s. As India pursues its 'Act East Policy', Vietnam has become a valuable partner in India's political and security engagements in the Indo-Pacific region. The two countries are working to address shared strategic concerns (such as energy security and open and secure sea lines of communication), and make policy choices without undue external interference. Given India's broadening economic and strategic interests in the region and Vietnam's desire for strategic autonomy, both countries will benefit from a stronger bilateral relationship. India and Vietnam face territorial disputes with and shared apprehensions about their common neighbour, China. Vietnam is of great strategic importance because its position enables it to control 'the South China Sea — a true Mediterranean of the Pacific'. The maritime domain, therefore, has become an essential element of India and Vietnam cooperation.

There are four key motivations behind India's growing maritime engagement with Vietnam. First, India's aspiration to counter an assertive China by strengthening Vietnam's military power. Second, with India's increasing trade with East and Southeast Asia, India has begun to recognise the importance of its sea lines of communication beyond its geographical proximity; the South China Sea occupies a significant geostrategic and geo-economic position, resulting in India's renewed interests in the South China Sea. Third, India desires to intensify its presence to track potential developments in the maritime domain that could affect its national interests. And fourth, the Indian Navy underlines the importance of a forward maritime presence and naval partnership that would be critical to deter potential adversaries. India's maritime strategic interests in the region are well established, including the fact that almost 55% of India's trade with the Indo-Pacific region passes through the South China Sea.

More importantly, India sees an open and stable maritime commons being essential to international trade and prosperity; therefore, it has an interest in protecting the sea lanes. With this renewed interest in the maritime domain, freedom of navigation, a peaceful resolution of

disputes and a respect for international laws have become salient features of the Indian approach. India is willing to take a principled stand on territorial disputes in the hope that it contributes to the stabilisation of the Indo-Pacific. Such positions align closely with Vietnam's stance on the management of the South China Sea disputes.

Ever since the formal declaration of a strategic partnership in 2007 and Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in 2016, the scope and scale of the India-Vietnam strategic and defence cooperation, particularly in the maritime domain, is deepening with a clear vision, institutional mechanisms and the necessary political support from both governments. The signing of 'Joint Vision for Defence Cooperation' and a memorandum of understanding on mutual logistics support in June 2022 has further strengthened mutual defence cooperation. While a U.S.\$100 million Defence Line of Credit has been implemented, India has also announced early finalisation of another U.S.\$500 million Defence Line of Credit to enhance Vietnam's defence capability. New Delhi has also agreed to expand military training and assist the Vietnam Navy's strike capabilities. For example, it is providing 'comprehensive underwater combat operation' training to Vietnamese sailors at INS Satavahana in Visakhapatnam. India's Defence Minister handed over 12 high-speed boats to Vietnam recently' a Khukri-class corvette is also expected to be gifted soon. Vietnam is also 'exploring the possibility of acquiring Indian-manufactured surveillance equipment such as unmanned aerial vehicles'.

The two countries are also engaging in wide-ranging practical cooperation in the maritime domain through a maritime security dialogue, naval exercises, ship visits, Coast Guard cooperation, and training and capacity building. They have found mutual convergences on cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region and are synergising their efforts to work in bilateral as well as other sub-regional and multilateral frameworks, such as the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), the Mekong-Ganga Cooperation, ADMM-Plus or the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting-Plus. The Special Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)-India Foreign Ministers' Meeting in June 2022 has proposed an ASEAN-India Maritime Exercise and informal meeting between India and ASEAN Defence Ministers in November 2022. Both countries are also looking at collaboration around the seven pillars of the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI).

There are some other potential areas for New Delhi and Hanoi to further deepen collaboration, such as meaningful academic and cultural collaborations, shipbuilding, maritime connectivity, maritime education and research, coastal engineering, the blue economy, marine habitat conservation, and advance collaboration between maritime security agencies. The IPOI framework presents immense opportunities for India-Vietnam relations to aid regional progress and peace. The road map agreed upon by the leaders will be helpful in addressing common challenges and decisively navigating towards making an India-Vietnam partnership that helps in stability in the Indo-Pacific.

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