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# THE INDIA-VIETNAM STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP

AN ASSESSMENT OF DIPLOMATIC TIES AND PROSPECTS

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**T**ODAY'S GLOBAL ORDER is characterized by increasing multipolarity and diplomacy. India and Vietnam's long-standing relationship since the early decades of the twentieth century are now termed a 'comprehensive strategic partnership'. In recent years, India and Vietnam have strengthened and deepened their diplomatic, defence, and strategic ties, building on their historically strong relations. Government discussions, bilateral agreements, defence lines of credit, future security contracts, maritime cooperation, and multilateralism are all part of their extensive collaboration. There is now a significant friendship based on new commonalities facilitated through embracing the Indo-Pacific outlook, ASEAN, developments in the South China Sea, a discussion over Quad, and more. The article begins with a brief introduction based on the diplomatic events and traditional analysis of India-Vietnam ties followed by an assessment of various forums and their priorities and concerns. This article thus focuses on briefly assessing India-Vietnam ties and the way forward for enhanced cooperation in the upcoming years.

## **Routes of Diplomacy – a Policy of Three Noes**

India and Vietnam both have a long history of using diplomacy and other soft power methods to achieve their foreign policy goals. Both nations achieved significant advancements in diplomacy in the first decade of the twenty-first century, as part of a growing trend in diplomatic initiatives across Asia, using both old and new media. Diplomatic ties between India and Vietnam were established in January 1972 and have turned to be 50 years in 2022. During the visit of Vietnam's Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung to India in July 2007, relations between the two nations were upgraded to the status of Strategic Partnership.

In his address to his Vietnamese counterpart Pham Minh Chinh in 2021, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said that the Indo-Vietnam comprehensive strategic partnership can help promote regional stability because both countries have a similar vision of an expansive, inclusionary, peaceful, and rules-based Indian Ocean region.

On December 21, 2020, Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc convened the first-ever India-Vietnam Virtual Summit, during which they established a historical "Joint Vision for Peace, Prosperity, and People" to steer bilateral ties in the coming years. The two

Foreign Ministers also agreed on a Plan of Action for the period 2021-23 on the margins of the Virtual Summit to put their shared vision into action.

A programme of Indian support in the conservation of M Sn, the Dong Duong Buddhist monastery in Quang Nam, and the Nhan Stupa in Phu Yen was also declared during a virtual meeting between Prime Ministers Narendra Modi and Nguyen Xuan Phuc at the same Summit.

On the event of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the India-Vietnam relationship, Vice President Vo Thi Anh Xuan praised India for making Vietnam a priority in its "Act East" policy, stating that the Vietnamese Party, State, Administration, and people have always placed a high priority on developing a comprehensive strategic partnership with India, viewing India as a strategic partner and a reliable friend. Pranay Verma, India's ambassador to Vietnam, expressed the hope that goodwill between the peoples of the two nations would be strengthened and bilateral ties would improve.<sup>1</sup>

According to the Ministry of National Defence<sup>2</sup>, adherence to what is known as the Three Noes policy has been one of the most significant and long-standing elements of Vietnam's strategic perspective and defence strategy. The three noes are:

- Vietnam will never form military alliances with other countries.
- It will not allow a foreign military base to be built on Vietnamese territory.
- It will never take sides in a conflict between two countries.

The 2019 Defence White Paper added the fourth NO, Vietnam will never use or attempt to use force in global affairs. The strengthening of connections with the United States, Japan, and India is proof of this.

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<sup>1</sup> Vna. "Vietnam, India Celebrate 50th Anniversary of Diplomatic Ties: Society: Vietnam+ (Vietnamplus)." VietnamPlus. VietnamPlus, January 6, 2022. <https://en.vietnamplus.vn/vietnam-india-celebrate-50th-anniversary-of-diplomatic-ties/220328.vnp>.

<sup>2</sup> "Mea: E-Citizen/RTI : Parliament Q & A : Rajya Sabha." Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India. Accessed March 11, 2022. [https://mea.gov.in/rajya-sabha.htm?dtl%2F27689%2FQUESTION\\_NO974\\_BORDER\\_DISPUTES\\_WITH\\_NEIGHBOURING\\_COUNTRIES](https://mea.gov.in/rajya-sabha.htm?dtl%2F27689%2FQUESTION_NO974_BORDER_DISPUTES_WITH_NEIGHBOURING_COUNTRIES).

# Security, Defence, and Maritime Cooperation

One of the major arenas for the India-Vietnam partnership is security, defence and maritime cooperation. Since the mid-1990s, and notably in 1994, when then-Prime Minister Narasimha Rao established India's "Look East" strategy, India-Vietnam defence and security cooperation has grown in scope and depth. In November 2009, the Indian and Vietnamese defence ministers signed an MoU on "Defense Cooperation," which was the most significant agreement for further bilateral cooperation.<sup>3</sup> The MoU laid the groundwork for India-Vietnam defence ties, expanding on the 1994 and 2000 bilateral defence accords. The 2009 Memorandum of Understanding was extended for a fifth year, from 2014 to 2019, in November 2013. To boost information exchange, the two parties signed an agreement on 'Reciprocal Protection of Classified Information Exchanges.'

When the India–Vietnam relationship was enhanced to a 'comprehensive strategic partnership' in September 2016, during Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Vietnam, the defence agreements were formalised. Security issues are also discussed in a 'Strategic Dialogue' between the foreign ministries of the national leaders. In April 2018, the 7th Strategic Dialogue took place, including discussions on marine security and counter-terrorism partnerships. The inaugural India–Vietnam Marine Security Dialogue was conducted in March 2019, with maritime cooperation being an important part of the bilateral relationship.<sup>4</sup>

During the virtual summit between the Indian and Vietnamese defence ministers in November 2020, it was agreed that Indian army, air force, and navy training teams would be stationed in Vietnam to provide customised training to Vietnamese training academies and armed forces personnel, including technical, procedural, and English language training. This has included Indian

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<sup>3</sup> “Mea: Statements : Bilateral/Multilateral Documents.” Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India. Accessed March 11, 2022. <https://mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl%2F22508%2Flist%2Bof%2Bdocuments%2Bsigned%2Bduring%2Bthe%2Bstate%2Bvisit%2Bof%2Bnguyen%2Bphu%2Btrong%2Bgeneral%2Bsecretary%2Bof%2Bcommunist%2Bparty%2Bof%2Bvietnam%2Bto%2BIndia>.

<sup>4</sup> “Mea: Statements : Press Releases.” Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India. Accessed March 11, 2022. <https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl%2F29803%2F10th%2BForeign%2BOffice%2BConsultations%2Band%2B7th%2BStrategic%2BDialogue%2Bbetween%2BIndia%2Band%2BVietnam>.

defence equipment training for the Vietnamese armed forces, as well as repairs to Vietnamese naval vessels and Vietnamese air force Russian-origin jets. Personnel for involvement in United Nations (UN) peacekeeping missions also receives bilateral defence training. This has included India deploying mobile training teams to Hanoi to teach the Vietnamese army at the Vietnamese Centre for Peacekeeping. Furthermore, the collaboration between the Indian and Vietnamese defence industries has become a developing field of defence cooperation, intending to explore the possibility of co-production of defence equipment as well as information exchange. With Indian defence minister Rajnath Singh's goal of a US\$26 billion defence industry in India by 2025 and India setting a target of US\$5 billion in defence exports by 2024, India's ability to facilitate the growth of Vietnam's defence industry is becoming a more important part of the bilateral relationship.<sup>5</sup>

Since 2018, two significant areas of maritime cooperation have been introduced to increase collaboration on topics such as sea lanes security and anti-piracy. During Indian naval deployments to Southeast Asia, the Indian and Vietnamese navies performed their first bilateral maritime exercise at Da Nang in May 2018, to improve synchronization and share practices between the two fleets. The drill included three Indian navy ships. Second, in March 2019, the first India–Vietnam Maritime Security Dialogue was conducted at the additional secretary level in Hanoi to strengthen the two governments' maritime security cooperation. In Cam Ranh Bay, Vietnam, India and Vietnam performed their second bilateral maritime exercise in April 2019, the drill included two Indian navy ships. The Indian and Vietnamese coast guards are cooperating more often in bilateral maritime cooperation. The most recent conference was held in December 2020, with an emphasis on 'transnational crime, capacity building, and ship visits.'

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<sup>5</sup> “Embassy of India Hanoi, Vietnam.” Embassy of India, Hanoi, Vietnam : Press Releases. Accessed March 11, 2022. [https://www.indembassyhanoi.gov.in/news\\_letter\\_detail/?id=152](https://www.indembassyhanoi.gov.in/news_letter_detail/?id=152).

## ASEAN

India-Vietnam ties have been significantly complemented by ASEAN led multilateral platforms. With Vietnam's admission to ASEAN in July 1995, India-Vietnam connections grew stronger. In 1992, India was designated as an ASEAN Sectoral Dialogue Partner, and in December 1995, it was promoted to Full Dialogue Partner. The ASEAN Regional Forum, the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting (ADMM) Plus, the East Asia Summit (EAS), and the ASEAN+1 summit, which brought together India and ten ASEAN nations, all gave India–Vietnam ties a boost. In 2020, while Vietnam was the ASEAN Chair, the partnership between the two nations grew. Vietnam's Prime Minister presided over the 15th EAS, which included India's foreign minister, as well as the 17th ASEAN-India prime ministerial summit in November 2020, where Prime Minister Modi emphasised the importance of ASEAN in India's "Act East" policy. The multilateral ASEAN summits gave an extra venue for India and Vietnam to address common security issues, such as those in the South China Sea. The concept of 'ASEAN Centrality' lies at the core of India's Indo-Pacific agenda.

India and Vietnam have been able to develop their defence and security cooperation in new regions, including space collaboration, because of India's participation with ASEAN. The Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) stated in March 2016 that it will develop a Satellite Tracking and Data Reception Station and Data Processing Facility in Vietnam for ASEAN nations.

## The Indo-Pacific and the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative

The Indo-Pacific perspective shared by India and Vietnam forms the foundation of the comprehensive strategic alliance. The primacy of Southeast Asia, the necessity of developing a rules-based order, ensuring freedom of navigation, the need to avoid superpower rivalries, and connectivity that seeks to promote trade rather than strategic competition were among the seven principles articulated by Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi in his keynote speech at the Shangri La Dialogue in 2018. Vietnamese President Tran Dai Quang discussed a similar strategy for the Indo-Pacific on his visit to India in 2018. The territorial disputes with China within the Indo-

continental Pacific's boundaries, such as the Himalayas, and the South China Sea, are intertwined for India and Vietnam because they affect Asia's power balance. Major announcements show that such interconnections are recognised. Vietnam and India are seeking more interaction with other major powers in light of rising territorial ambitions.

Vietnam's 'four-no's' policy was reaffirmed in the country's 2019 Defense White Paper. Vietnam increased its contacts with nations such as the United States and Japan while retaining its policy of NOs commitment. Vietnam has constantly supported India on a regional and international level since the Look East policy and AEP were implemented in India. Vietnam has helped India in its efforts to establish a stronger regional and global presence. As a result, the IPOI of Modi is also welcomed by Vietnam. Peace, stability, collaboration, and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific area are shared objectives for the two nations, as long as international law is respected.

Furthermore, Vietnam, in collaboration with India, might aim to enhance its security ties with major powers by forming strong ties with the Quad-like-minded nations with Indo-Pacific aspirations. These countries could help Hanoi counter China's rising aggression in the area.

Moreover, PM Modi launched IPOI (Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative) in 2019, which is an 'open for all initiative' that is based on seven pillars, namely: Capacity Building and Resource Sharing; Disaster Risk Reduction and Management; Maritime Ecology; Maritime Resources; Maritime Security; Science, Technology and Academic Cooperation; and Trade Connectivity and Maritime Transport.<sup>6</sup> Vietnam and the Philippines, both ASEAN members, have committed to collaborate closely with India through the IPOI. Other important multilateral and minilateral initiatives, such as SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region), the Supply Chain Resilience Initiative, the Blue Dot Network, and the Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure, have paved the way for a partnership between India and Vietnam.

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<sup>6</sup> "Ministry of External Affairs." Accessed March 11, 2022.  
[https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/Indo\\_Feb\\_07\\_2020.pdf](https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/Indo_Feb_07_2020.pdf).

# The South China Sea and Cards at Play

The South China Sea has been strategically pivotal to India-Vietnam ties. As the 'diamond on the South China Sea,' Vietnam acts as a roadblock to Chinese dominance in the region, preventing Beijing from projecting strength into the Indian Ocean via the Strait of Malacca. Many analysts on India's policy response to China believe that Vietnam can provide significant strategic weight to put pressure on China's southern flanks, thereby presenting it with a two-front struggle. For them, India's 'Vietnam card' in the South China Sea against China is analogous to China's 'Pakistan Card' in the Indian Ocean. As India and Vietnam are at the centre of the evolving Indo-Pacific architecture due to their geographical position, they play a critical role in this strategic domain, which is quickly becoming the major arena for great power politics. This is further demonstrated by the fact that both India and Vietnam have worked hard to keep the area peaceful, stable, growing, and prosperous. For example, both countries have emphasised the significance of sustaining peace and stability, as well as peaceful dispute remedies based on international law, such as the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea of 1982. Concerning the South China Sea, both countries have emphasised the importance of fully implementing the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the East Vietnam Sea (DOC) and establishing a Code of Conduct (COC).

Given the power imbalance, Vietnam's South China Sea strategy is as defensive and reactionary as possible, in contrast to China's assertive and offensive approach. A close examination of Vietnamese foreign policy reveals that the country does not wish to engage in a direct conflict with China. Unlike the Philippines, which took China to the International Court of Justice over the South China Sea dispute, Vietnam went ahead to keep its status quo.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> "Driving Forward the India-Vietnam Relationship." Bharat Shakti, December 13, 2021. <https://bharatshakti.in/driving-forward-the-india-vietnam-relationship/>.

## Recent Developments

On July 6, 2007, India and Vietnam inked a strategic partnership deal, making it one of India's first strategic alliances in the Southeast Asian area. Over the previous six years of the Act East strategy, some major events have taken place in terms of improving the India–Vietnam ties. A notable milestone in that respect has happened during PM Modi's visit to Vietnam in September 2016. PM Modi described Vietnam as an "important pillar of Act East policy" during his visit.

PM Modi's declaration during the India–Vietnam virtual summit between Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc on December 21, 2020, addresses all aspects of defence and security relations and hinted at a push in relations. The overt defence dimension in bilateral relations can be attributed to the two countries' friendship. India and Vietnam are bound together by common aims, comparable approaches, aligned interests, and shared interests. Traditional military cooperation, intelligence communication, port calls, military personnel training, capacity building, Lines of Credit for defence procurement, and other forms of defence cooperation are now on the agenda.

India, on the other hand, should not exaggerate the benefits of a partnership that has solid foundations but also fundamental flaws. Because of its strategic location on the South China Sea, Vietnam is at the centre of the regional strategic debate. With various claimants to the South China Sea, Vietnam is well-positioned to mediate the numerous disputes and claims that have arisen because of the conflict. Vietnam, as a regional power, has cards to play with India's economic and hydrocarbon aspirations.

Assessing the India-Vietnam ties, It may be claimed that, based on its assessments of regional security dynamics, Vietnam will continue to pursue its policy of establishing bilateral strategic partnerships while treading carefully in developing multilateral agreements that are not geared against a specific state. As a result, Vietnam's strategic and diplomatic initiatives will remain in sync with those of its ASEAN counterparts. More significantly, given the region's fluid strategic dynamics and the unpredictability of key parties, Vietnam will continue to be involved with as many primary players as feasible.

Bilateral collaboration between India and Vietnam might be strengthened by trilateral involvement with Japan, with Tokyo bolstering relations with Hanoi. With India's relations with Japan improving, this presents a chance for India, Japan, and Vietnam to collaborate on defence and security problems on a trilateral basis. It's also crucial to consider security cooperation in the context of the greater Indo-Pacific, where there is a multitude of other topics of mutual concern that must be considered to achieve broad-based security understanding and collaboration.

In this context, it is beneficial to implement and establish the Quad-Plus framework to have consultations on a variety of topics. Vietnam's admission to the Quad-Plus will undoubtedly broaden Hanoi's strategic options while also helping to establish a robust and long-lasting regional security system.

Vietnam and India must also encourage cultural exchange initiatives that connect the peoples of the two nations.<sup>8</sup> Televisions may be an excellent tool for fostering cultural awareness. Currently, the Indian government has expressed interest in establishing television channels in Vietnam.

The ongoing and upcoming projects provide a new vision and opportunity for both nations with aligned interests to procure their objectives and advance in the global order.

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<sup>8</sup> Misra, Jitendra Nath. "Vietnamese Views of India." ORF, February 2, 2022. <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/vietnamese-views-of-india/>.

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