



Indo-Vietnam Relations: An Answer to Sino-Pak Partnership?

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China's assertive rise and India's ambition of transforming into a major player have been instrumental in shaping the dynamism of Southern Asian geopolitics, which has tied the two countries in a competitive grid. The article reviews the security cooperation between China and Pakistan and compares it to the Indo-Vietnam security equation. China's forays in the Indian Ocean Region, belligerence in the South China Sea, developments in Pakistan occupied Kashmir (PoK) and the "string of pearls" have attracted India's attention. Besides, experts for a long time have regarded the Sino-Pakistan military partnership as a threat to Indian security. In light of this, India has been strengthening its relations with Southeast Asian countries and Indo-Vietnam relations remain an important area of focus. Dwelling on the nuances of Indo-Vietnam relations, the article examines the security cooperation between India and Vietnam vis-à-vis China-Pakistan relations. Finally, the article deliberates on the possibility of Indo-Vietnam relations acting as a counter to the Sino-Pakistan partnership.

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Introduction

The contemporary world is marked by the rise of Southern Asia and changing political coalitions throughout the international arena. China's rise has become a source of consternation for many and has compelled nations to form federations to obviate a belligerent China from greatly flexing its military muscles. Consider the case of South Asia, where conterminous India and China rise concurrently, plagued by varied challenges. Post the 1962 war, Indo-China relations have been marred by mutual mistrust and antipathy. The territorial dispute has remained intractable for decades, albeit maintaining very strong economic affairs. Today, India sees the rhetorically proclaimed Indo-China strategic partnership being eroded by Chinese military assertiveness in disputed land and maritime claims, widely practiced irredentism, amplified defence cooperation with Pakistan, maritime encirclement of India by the "string of pearls", etc. These events have prompted India to accelerate its military modernisation, undertake infrastructural development on the border areas and simultaneously work on converging interests with a range of countries.

For China to ascertain its place as a major player in global politics, its focus would continue to remain on the Indian Ocean and beyond. Dr Harsh V. Pant, a Reader at King's College London, states that China's "maritime strength" would present it with "the strategic leverage it needs to emerge as the regional hegemon and a potential superpower".¹ Chinese maritime ambitions have been attracting reactions from India, manifesting itself in a more emboldened and strategically relevant "India's Look East". Consequently, this has resulted in a tussle for influence in the maritime domain. The precariousness of Indo-China affairs is being played out in the maritime sphere constantly and is being reflected by increased Chinese presence in the Indian Ocean, naval assistance to Pakistan, construction of the Gwadar port and objection over Indian oil explorations activities in the South China Sea (SCS).

From the strategic viewpoint, the Southeast Asian (SEA) countries are of prime interest to the two Asian giants, India and China. Indochina and neighbouring countries form a shielding pad for India and act as a "first line of defence".² China's domination of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) region has the prospects to pose a security threat to India, which makes SEA countries and particularly Vietnam principally important for India. India's increasing footprints in the SCS is evidence of its growing interests beyond the Indian Ocean Region and the

developments are being closely monitored by China. Palpably, India's Look East Policy has been a source of worry for China. In view of this, Li Hong Mei, the editor of *People's Daily* wrote warned in an editorial that, "India still cannot relax its spasm of worries about China, nor can it brush aside the fear that China might nip its ambitions in the bud".³

In 2011, India's Look East Policy and especially its oil exploration interests in the SCS became a point of global attention. In October 2011, India's state owned Oil and Natural Gas Corp.'s foreign arm, OVL, and Vietnam's Petro Vietnam signed an accord to undertake investments, oil and gas exploration in Vietnamese jurisdiction of SCS.⁴ China has claimed much of the SCS, including the blocks that are regarded by Vietnam as its own maritime stretch according to the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). The Indo-Vietnam deal was viewed very critically by China, which was conspicuous in an editorial which remarked that, "China may consider taking actions to show its stance and prevent more reckless attempts in confronting China in the area".⁵ Despite this, Vietnam greatly welcomes Indian participation; just as it supported the American involvement in the SCS dispute, in order to present a unified front to challenge the Chinese claim.

Against this backdrop, few Indian strategists argue for an Indo-Vietnam collaboration akin to the Sino-Pakistan partnership, that has for years been an "irritant" for the Indian security landscape. The scenario is perceptively described by Mohan Malik, a professor at the Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies, Honolulu, who avers that, "Vietnam could be to India what Pakistan is to China – a friend because it could be the enemy of its enemy".⁶ Vietnam has the potential to "exert indirect, debilitating pressure on its strategic rival" and as argued by Harsh Pant, could provide India with an "entry-point" through which it can "penetrate China's periphery".⁷ However, this hypothesis needs to be deliberated upon. The subsequent sections separately examine the security cooperation between China–Pakistan and India–Vietnam. Following that, the two equations are compared in order to examine if Indo-Vietnam relations can currently be seen as a counter to Sino-Pakistan partnership.

Sino-Pak Security Cooperation

Tracing back six decades, China and Pakistan have throughout enjoyed robust strategic ties, specifically defence cooperation. The essence of their "all weather" and

“higher than mountains, deeper than the ocean, stronger than steel and sweeter than honey”⁸ relationship is greatly embedded in the history of their relation. Pakistan was the third non-communist country and the first Muslim country to recognise the People’s Republic of China (PRC) on 4 January 1950. The Bandung Conference in 1955 acted as a pivotal platform for their diplomatic rapport.

Pakistan’s affiliation to China can be largely attributed to its security insecurities in the sub-continent and fluctuating relationship with its “fair weather” friend, the United States. Owing to the perceived Indian threat and inability to match up to India’s conventional superiority, Pakistan became a part of the American sponsored SEATO and CENTO in the early 1950s. Notwithstanding this, Beijing viewed these alliances as bait by Western countries to fulfil their hegemonistic desires and was not critical of the Asian members that formed a part of the alliance. Furthermore, the Asian countries were considered “foolish” for not gauging the “sinister intentions” of the Western world. For a long time, Pakistan continued to accommodate its obligations to the Western alliance and at the same time nurtured its ties with China.

During the 1962 Sino-India War, Pakistan’s Western allies assisted its arch enemy, India, by providing arms to fight the “Red China”. This development irked Islamabad and prompted it to diversify its strategic connections. At the same time, China jumped to replace the United States and gratify Pakistan’s geopolitical insecurities. For China, a Sino-Pakistan *entente* warranted a diminished Western influence in its neighbourhood. The Sino-Indian War had fortified the bond illustrating the phrase, “the enemy of my enemy is my friend”. Feeling humiliated by the defeat, India’s defence budget swelled after the 1962 war. As India’s defence spending peaked, China granted Pakistan an interest-free loan worth \$60 million in 1964. Subsequently, another interest-free loan of \$40.6 million was offered in 1969 followed by \$217.4 million in 1970.⁹ Post the Indo-Pakistan War in 1965, the United States imposed an arms embargo on Pakistan. At the same time, China satisfactorily satiated Islamabad military hunger by arming it against India. Even though the arms were not at par with the technology offered by the United States, the sheer numbers compensated for the compromised quality.

The bond was further strengthened by the Sino-Soviet split, which compelled China to build on its affiliations with anti-USSR partners in the region and seek new partners in the Western front. Helping China to thaw its relations with the United

States, Pakistan became an interlocutor and facilitated Henry Kissinger's secret visit to China in 1971. With innumerable converging security interests, Sino-Pakistan affairs have fostered to a level when China's South Asia strategy remains incomplete without Pakistan.

After the collapse of the USSR in 1991, China employed its "Pakistan card" to bog India down in the region and limit its rise as a regional or global player. Pakistan is also viewed as a bridge to reach the Muslim world and the energy abundant countries of West Asia. Pakistan presents the land-locked western part of China a route to the Indian Ocean and a physical channel to the Central Asian Republics. Pakistan remains pivotal for China's ambition of developing its western flank and transforming its troubled Xinjiang province (which borders Pakistan) into an economic hub. Internationally, China and Pakistan have periodically granted each other diplomatic support at regional and international forums or on issues of international concern (like safety of Pakistan's nuclear weapons, terrorism). To illustrate, Pakistan supported China's membership to the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). Likewise, China supported Pakistan's entry into ASEAN, the Asia Europe Summit, etc.

In view of Pakistan's security landscape, China remains central to Islamabad's survival as a potential challenger to India. Without China, it would have been rather difficult for Pakistan to remain assertive as an autonomous South Asian country, in light of the perceived Indian threat and periodic American pressures. Given the inconsistency of American support to Pakistan, China has been a reliable partner, continually offering Pakistan arms, weapon systems and diplomatic support.

China and Pakistan share one of the most comprehensive defence cooperation in the present day context. China has throughout been a pillar for Pakistan's military growth in conventional and nuclear terms. Apart from providing defence deals without many strings attached, the two partners are also involved in joint production projects involving fighter aircrafts, missile frigates, etc. Since 1964, Chinese arms supply to Pakistan has included a range of arms and weapons systems like surface-to-air missiles (R-440 Crotale), an anti-submarine warfare helicopter (AS-565SA Panther), fighter aircrafts (F-7MG), etc.¹⁰

Besides this, China aided Pakistan in achieving a degree of self-reliance in the defence sector. It helped Pakistan in the development of defence related infrastructure, such as the Heavy Industries Taxila facility, which has been involved in the

licensed manufacturing and overhauling of different types of tanks and self-propelled guns such as the Chinese T-59 MBTs, T-69, etc.¹¹ It lent a hand in the establishment of Pakistan Aeronautical Complex (PAC) Karma, which is currently dealing with the joint development of JF-17 fighter aircraft in Pakistan.¹² Other joint production ventures include the manufacture of MBT 2000 (Al-Khalid Tank), K-8 Karakorum light attack aircraft, etc.

Military cooperation between China and Pakistan was institutionalised with the establishment of the China–Pakistan Defense and Security Talks and the Joint Committee on Cooperation in Defence Technology and Industry, in 2002 and 2003 respectively. Through these mechanisms, senior military officials periodically interact with each other and continuously review the relationship. In 2005, China and Pakistan signed a landmark Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation, which is the closest the two countries have come to reaching a seeming alliance. The countries committed that “neither party will join any alliance or bloc which infringed upon the sovereignty, security and territorial integrity” of any of the nations and both “would not conclude treaties of this nature with any third party”.¹³

Chinese assistance has exponentially accelerated the modernisation of Pakistan’s army, navy and air force. From 1978 to 2008, China sold to Pakistan equipment roughly worth \$7 billion, which included short- and medium- range ballistic missiles, small arms and conventional weapon systems.¹⁴ In order to boost its maritime fighting capabilities, Pakistan has ordered four F-22P frigates, out of which three were delivered in 2009, 2010 and 2011 respectively.¹⁵

Apart from conventional arms, China’s assistance to Pakistan in the nuclear sphere is unprecedented. The early days of Chinese support to Pakistan’s nuclear programme can be traced back post the 1971 war, but it peaked during the 1980s. It was only in 1986 when Sino-Pakistan nuclear cooperation was formalised through a comprehensive nuclear cooperation agreement. During the early 1980s, the Chinese assisted the Pakistan Atomic Energy Commission (PAEC), in multiple projects, like UF₆, Reprocessing, Conversion, production reactors, etc.¹⁶

Dr Abdul Qadeer Khan, the father of Pakistan’s nuclear programme revealed that the Chinese gifted “Kg 50 of weapon-grade enriched uranium, enough for two weapons”.¹⁷ Subsequently, China supplied the heavy water Khushab reactor, which has been pivotal for Pakistan’s plutonium production.¹⁸ Helping Pakistan augment its uranium enrichment capabilities, China provided it with 5000 custom made ring

magnets, which aided the high-speed rotation of centrifuges.¹⁹ Reports have averred that Beijing also provided Islamabad with nuclear warhead designs from China's 1966 nuclear test²⁰ and offered its test facilities at Lop Nur for a nuclear test.²¹ Pakistan is currently operating two nuclear reactors (Chashma 1 and Chashma 2) supplied by China. In April 2010, China initiated the plans of building two additional 300 MW reactors, Chashma 3 and 4, alongside its previous projects.

Embarking on longstanding missile collaboration, China provided Pakistan with 34 short-range ballistic M-11 missiles in 1992. Post-international condemnation and sanctions for the supply, China reportedly helped Pakistan to develop its indigenous missile capabilities for future productions. They assisted in building a ballistic missile manufacturing facility near Rawalpindi and developing the solid-fuelled Shaheen-I ballistic missile.²² Throughout, PRC companies supported and helped Pakistan to produce solid-fuel short-range ballistic missiles (Shaheen-1, Abdali, and Ghaznavi) and solid-fuel MRBMs (Shaheed-2 medium-range ballistic missiles).²³

Interestingly, every time Pakistan became diplomatically isolated in the international arena, China incessantly supports Pakistan, through profoundly rhetorical statements or greatly publicised defence deals. This pattern is evident throughout their 60 years of diplomatic relations. One such recent instance was after the killing of Osama bin Laden, when China expedited the delivery of 50 JF-17 fighter aircrafts, fully funded by China to boost Pakistan's air defence capability.²⁴

Though the two countries portray their relationship as undisputed, the reality is far more complex and pregnant with contentious facets. The issue of Uighur militants is a sensitive issue for them, as the training of Uighur militants groups like East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) is attributed to terrorist groups in Pakistan. Other issues include the safety of Chinese workers in Pakistan and general instability and radicalism in Pakistan, which is bound to influence the association. Nonetheless, these issues have not affected the defence/security relations between the two countries, which remain the most prominent and stable facet of Sino-Pakistan friendship.

Indian Concerns

The factor of Sino-Pakistan "all-weather" friendship is viewed as an impediment in India's defence landscape. Coupled with Chinese assertiveness, Chinese activities in

Pakistan pose serious threats to Indian security interests. The India factor in Sino-Pakistan relations is best explained by Husain Haqqani, former Pakistani ambassador to the United States. He states that “For Pakistan, China is a high-value guarantor of security against India. Additionally, for China, Pakistan is a low-cost secondary deterrent to India”.²⁵

Sino-Pakistan collaboration is greatly reflected in the Gwadar port project and in the developments in Pakistan occupied Kashmir (PoK), which has the capability to seriously impede India’s maritime and land security. The presence of 11,000 soldiers of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) in Gilgit Baltistan under the pretext of humanitarian relief and developmental projects is a testament to an intensifying military understanding between Islamabad and Beijing. A potential Sino-Pakistan military collusion against India would present India with a two-front war situation. For a long time, China has followed the policy of using Pakistan as a deterrent against India so that Indian military forces and efforts are concentrated on the western border, while China expands its military capabilities and infrastructure along India’s eastern borders.

Other Chinese activities which have alarmed India are the up-gradation of the Karakoram highway, construction of railway and road networks that connect China to the Arabian Sea. China has also endorsed the idea of upgrading Pakistan’s railway network to gain access to Afghanistan, where India’s interests lie. In addition, China has also undertaken construction of large-scale power generation plants and a collaborated project with Pakistan to lay 820 km optical fibre cable (OFC) system connecting Rawalpindi to Khunjerab Pass.²⁶

Developments on the maritime front include the escalating Sino-Pakistan naval cooperation, which lubricates their relationship and raises hackles in New Delhi. Attempting to secure its sea lines of communication (SLOC) and gain sustained access to energy resources and foreign markets, China has marked a strong presence in the Indian backwaters, which remains Indian Navy’s primary area of focused interest.²⁷ China is expanding its presence in the Indian Ocean littorals through economic influence and potential security relationships. The strategy is termed as the “string of pearls” by a US military report and considered as the most potential threat.²⁸ Markedly, the Chinese string of pearls strategy has encircled India with many potential bases that can hamper India’s maritime interests. On India’s western coast, China has assisted Pakistan in the construction of a major deep sea port in

Gwadar, Balochistan. Other potential “pearls” include Chinese footprints in Myanmar’s naval facilities at Kyaukpyu and Hainggyi Island on the Bay of Bengal and Hambantota in Sri Lanka.

According to B. Raman, the Director of the Institute for Topical Studies, Chennai, current Chinese interest in Hambantota may be purely for the “use of docking and refuelling facilities . . . for commercial and naval ships”. He adds that, “no proposal at present for a Chinese naval base at Hambantota” seems to be likely.²⁹ Despite this, Gwadar port lingers as a matter of serious concern for India. Even though Gwadar currently cannot be viewed as a military threat, the establishment of capabilities there give rise to the belief that any change in intentions can impede India’s naval security.

The Gwadar port would proffer Pakistan a greater strategic depth and decrease its reliance on the Karachi port, if attacked by the Indian Navy in the event of a conflict.³⁰ Adding to the concern, Pakistani Defence Minister Chaudhry Ahmed Mukhtar, in October 2011, stated that Pakistan would be grateful to the Chinese government if a naval base was constructed at Gwadar for Pakistan. Beijing unequivocally responded that the “issue was not touched upon”. Most of the aspects of Sino-Pak strategic cooperation materialise behind closed doors; therefore it becomes difficult to infer the exact nature and magnitude of their nexus.³¹ Expanding on the “serious strategic implications for India”, Admiral Sureesh Mehta, Chairman of the National Maritime Foundation stated that Gwadar built on Balochistan coast is “180 nautical miles from the exit of the Straits of Hormuz” and can “enable Pakistan to take control over the world energy jugular and interdiction of Indian tankers”.³² As Pakistan is considered a central country for Chinese forays in the Indian Ocean Region, similarly, Vietnam is often equated as an equally important state for India’s steps in the SCS.

India Vietnam Relations

India’s Look East Policy, initiated in 1991, was initially limited to the economic dimension, but eventually metamorphosed into a strategic oriented venture. Vietnam is considered imperative in India’s Look East Policy, primarily because of its geostrategic location (it lies between important SLOCs connecting West Pacific to the Indian Ocean) and historical relations with India. The Indianised Kingdom of Champa (located roughly in Southern Vietnam) was controlled by Hindu dynasties

from 2nd century AD (until 1471) and the relationship was marked by cultural and economic exchanges. During the Cold War years, communist North Vietnam allied with Red China against the United States and South Vietnam. Unforeseen as it may have been, Sino-Vietnam relations in due course deteriorated due to ideological and historical differences. Taking advantage of Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia, China launched an attack on Vietnam in 1979. Vietnam's heroic defence against the Chinese forces resulted in large casualties for the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA). Within a month of the war, China withdrew its forces.³³ Resultantly, Vietnam grew closer to the USSR and India. Nevertheless, China continued to infiltrate the Sino-Vietnam border in order to keep the issue alive.

Having faced Chinese aggression in 1972 and 1979, India and Vietnam have shared a degree of antagonism towards China. In the last five years, India and Vietnam's discomfort has been exacerbated by China's assertiveness and its advocacy of irredentism. Vietnam's streak for independence and its strong defence against hegemonic powers in the region was seen by India as a potential force to counter Chinese ambitions.

Indo-Vietnam military interactions can be traced back to the 1980s. For a long time, India has supported Vietnam's defence restructuring. After the Sino-Vietnam war, an Indian delegation from the National Defence College, headed by Air-Marshal D.G. King-lee, visited Lang Son Province and inspected areas destroyed by the Chinese.³⁴ On May 6, 1980, the Commander of the Eastern Fleet, Rear Admiral Jain led two Indian destroyers and one submarine to ports in Vietnam. This visit was regarded as an "active contribution of the friendship and solidarity between the peoples and armed forces of Vietnam and India".³⁵ Since 1981, there have been many military exchanges between the two sides. Frequent exchanges at the ministerial and military level have infused greater goodwill in the relationship. It was the initiation of India's Look East Policy which sought to take the equation to a new level. Former Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao initiated India's "Look East" policy in 1991, which was a testament to India's desire to enhance economic relations with SEA countries. The fall of the USSR caused much anxiety within India as it was an indispensable part of India's economic and strategic policies. As averred by Ambassador Rajiv Sikri, "both [India's economic crisis and the fall of the Soviet Union] these events compelled India to take a fresh look at its foreign policy".³⁶

The economic liberalisation of India was therefore dependent on new markets and SEA seemed to be an ideal region to fulfil its economic ambitions. India's economic expansion was clubbed with a view to achieve greater political influence among the SEA nations and work towards comprehensive security relations. Therefore, a defence cooperation agreement was signed between India and Vietnam in 1994.³⁷ The cooperation covered the aspects of defence technology and training slots were offered to Vietnam.³⁸ Following this, India's Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL) agreed on overhauling engines of Vietnam's MiG-21s.³⁹ Still, the agreement did not culminate in path-breaking cooperation, as hoped by Vietnam because of its dire need to upgrade its military capacity by new equipment and training of personnel. Through the 1990s, India's Look East Policy remained focused on the economic front and did very little to explore the strategic and security dimensions. India's strategic priorities and naval power projection underwent a marked change after the Pokharan nuclear tests of 1998.

Even though India and Vietnam had a bilateral agreement for cooperation in the utilisation of atomic energy for peaceful purposes since March 1986, the momentum in the relations came after 1998.⁴⁰ In 1999, the Indian Atomic Energy Commission and Vietnam Atomic Energy inked another agreement on nuclear cooperation. The agreement covered aspects of exchange of scientists and assistance in setting up a training centre in Vietnam.⁴¹ India agreed to supply laboratory equipment for nuclear research institute in Dalat, Vietnam and nearly 30 Vietnamese nuclear scientists were trained in India.⁴²

A major push to Indo-Vietnam relations came in March 2000. Former Indian Defence Minister, George Fernandes, signed a new defence agreement, which sought to assist Vietnam in enhancing its military capacity. The major aspects of the deal were as follows:

- India to undertake repair and overhaul the Russian MiG aircraft fleet of the Vietnamese Air Force and train pilots.
- India's assistance in setting up of Vietnam's defence industry and in manufacturing small and medium weapons and certain ordinance products.
- Vietnam to buy India's multi-role, advance light helicopter and fast patrol boats.

- India to provide expertise available with its Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) to assist Vietnamese victims of chemical warfare.
- The Indian Navy to assist in the repair, up-gradation and building of vessels of the Vietnamese navy and train its technical personnel.
- India to train Vietnamese officers in the application of information technology and software development in the defence field.
- Vietnam to train Indian soldiers in jungle warfare, an art that the Vietnamese army has mastered owing to its rich experience in the warfare.
- Indian Coast Guards and the Vietnamese sea-police were to cooperate in anti-piracy operations in the SCS.⁴³

After the agreement, an increase in high-level political and defence exchanges between the two countries became apparent. One may infer that a strengthened Indo-Vietnam relation acted as a counter strategy to Chinese activities around India at that point of time. The protection of SLOCs in the Eastern Straits is chiefly important for India, as India becoming increasingly dependent on the trade route.

Wary of the Chinese presence in Myanmar and Chinese attempts to gain greater influence in the Indian Ocean Region, India setup a strategic tri-service command in Andaman and Nicobar Islands. The Andaman and Nicobar Command (ANC) also ensured India's forward presence in the eastern Indian Ocean Region and offered the Indian Navy a platform for effective presence in the Bay of Bengal and Arabian Sea. Increased naval presence in Andaman and Nicobar (A&N) facilitates greater security and defence cooperation with the SEA countries, as these islands are closer to SEA than the Indian mainland. In May 2003, as India and Vietnam entered "the 21st century", the countries signed a "Joint Declaration on Frame-work of Comprehensive Cooperation". The most significant clauses were:⁴⁴

- Conducting regular high-level meetings.
- Close cooperation in United Nations and other international forums.
- Assisting each other in protecting respective interests in the international arena.
- Gradual steps to expand cooperation in the security and defence fields.

In 2005, Vietnam advocated India's presence at the First Asian Summit and blocked Pakistan's entry to the ASEAN Regional Forum. India also supported Vietnam's

accession to the World Trade Organization. It is important to note that if India becomes a major player in SEA, China would become more perceptive of India's sensitivities in its neighbourhood.

In an attempt to further heighten India's defence cooperation with Vietnam, Indian Defence Minister A.K. Antony and Vietnamese General Phung Quang Thanh signed an agreement in 2007. The agreement sought to take the defence cooperation to "new heights" and a "new chapter in defence cooperation" between the two countries. The main theme of the agreement revolved around enhancing exchange of delegations, expanding training and defence industries cooperation. Apart from aspects covered in the previous agreement, India agreed to:⁴⁵

- Transfer 5000 items of naval spares belonging to Petya class of ships to Vietnam to make many of the ageing vessels operational.
- Deputation of a four-member team to impart training on UN peacekeeping operations.
- Increase in the frequency of goodwill visits by naval ships.

India realised the importance of modernising Vietnam's ageing military assets. It has aided in capacity-building through repair and maintenance of its military platforms. India's primary objective is to assist Vietnam in propping up its naval capabilities and air power. India's assistance to Vietnam in spare parts, repairs and maintenance is aided by the fact that both have a major chunk of military hardware of Russian origin. Strengthened Vietnamese armed forces would automatically deter China from achieving unchallenged supremacy in the SCS. China's policy of using Pakistan as a proxy to bog down India in South Asia may be seen as a reason for India's increasing strategic propinquity with Vietnam. Vietnam has been a staunch supporter of India's bid for a permanent seat at the United Nations Security Council, India voted for Vietnam's bid for a temporary seat in 2007.

In October 2010, at the first ASEAN+8 Defence Ministers' Meeting, India's Defence Minister A.K. Antony announced that India would help enhance Vietnam's armed forces' capacities and laid emphasis on the need to greatly expand naval cooperation between the two countries. Naval cooperation remains important for the security of sea lanes as they remain "one of the most important drivers of global economic growth" in Asia-Pacific region.⁴⁶ The two also agreed on

cooperating in areas like information technology and English training of Vietnamese Army personnel.⁴⁷

In June 2011, during a meeting between Vietnamese and Indian Naval senior officers, Vietnamese Vice Admiral Hien offered Indian Chief of Naval Staff, Admiral Nirmal Verma permanent berthing facilities at the port of Nha Trang. This reflects the maturation of the Indo-Vietnam ties as the Indian Navy is the only foreign navy to be given such a privilege at a port other than Halong Bay near Hanoi.⁴⁸ It can be implied that it is India's benign pose and the lack of any maritime dispute with Vietnam that facilitates stronger maritime relations.

Under the agreement, INS *Airavat* was the first ship to make a port call at Nha Trang in late July 2011. There have been numerous news reports stating that the ship had a face-off with the Chinese navy, which "challenged" the Indian navy vessel and asked for an explanation for its presence in "Chinese" waters. The reports were rejected by the Indian and Chinese governments respectively.⁴⁹ However, India affirmed that it supported the "freedom of navigation in international waters, including the SCS".⁵⁰ In September 2011, the Minister of External Affairs, S.M. Krishna undertook a much-publicised three day visit to Vietnam. Expressing satisfaction at the progress of their strategic partnership, the countries agreed to "add greater content to bilateral relations in the fields of Defence and Security" along with other areas.⁵¹ The countries consented on strengthening naval ties and establishing a sustainable maritime presence. Experience on Russian weapons and submarines makes it possible for India to assist Vietnam with "intensive" submarine and underwater warfare training.⁵² In a Russia–Vietnam agreement of 2009, Russia would be transferring six Kilo class submarines to Vietnam along with additional military hardware. India's operational experience on Russia's 10 Kilo-class submarines offers an important converging point in naval cooperation. Vietnamese sailors would therefore be trained for operations at the Indian Navy's submarine school INS *Satavahana* in Vishakapatnam.⁵³

With more frequent military visits and high-level military and civilian exchanges, 2012 is being celebrated as the Vietnam–India Friendship Year 2012. The question remains if enhanced Indo-Vietnam relations would continue at the same pace or would weaken as it happened in the past? Also, if these old friends can refresh their bond and challenge other coalitions, particularly Sino-Pakistan?

India–Vietnam Relations: A Counter?

Firstly, it cannot be denied that the level of strategic contact between India and Vietnam is not nearly of the same intensity as the Sino-Pakistan nexus in the present day context. Over the years, China has steadily transferred arms and military hardware to Pakistan. It has actively assisted Pakistan through missile transfers and the proliferation of nuclear material.

India's limited nuclear engagement with Vietnam, on the other hand, began only in 1999. In 2005, India had supplied Vietnam with cobalt under international nuclear regulatory authorities for a nuclear unit at Ho Chi Minh City.⁵⁴ While India need not match China in its illicit transfer of nuclear material and designs, New Delhi has the potential to assist Vietnam in training skilled human resources and other assistance possible under the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) regulations such as nuclear trade and fuel processing.⁵⁵

In terms of arms transfer, China recently rose up to being Pakistan's largest defence supplier.⁵⁶ On the other hand, India's arms transfers to Vietnam are almost negligible. Supply of spare parts for Vietnam's ageing arms and vessels dominates India's arms trade with Vietnam. The focus should shift towards offering new and hi-tech arms and ammunitions. In 2007, Vietnam acquired almost 100 SMG-PK 9 mm submachine guns and 50 sniper rifles from state-run Pakistan Ordnance Factories (POF). Similar quantities of weapons were procured in 2006.⁵⁷ Defence analysts blamed India's reticence and hesitancy in fulfilling its assurance to Vietnam in providing military hardware. A lack of speedy decision-making was also evident after India assured Vietnam of providing it with India's indigenous surface-to-surface Prithvi missile.

“India is handicapped by its excessive caution in boldly exercising its strategic options coupled with its highly complex and uncoordinated procedures required to export military goods”, in Major General Thapliyal's words.⁵⁸ It is these inconsistencies from the Indian side that impede a strengthening bond. Recently, there have been reports about India's keenness in selling its BrahMos supersonic cruise missile to Vietnam.⁵⁹ A joint venture between Russia and India, the BrahMos missile would improve Vietnam's military preparedness and provide it with the option of keeping the Chinese navy on the defensive in the SCS. Notably, the missile has never been sold to a third party, even though some countries have expressed their

interest to acquire it. New Delhi is aware that transferring BrahMos to Vietnam would invite harsh criticism from Beijing. Only time will tell if New Delhi would follow up on its promise to Vietnam or give up on the option due to fears of antagonising China.

Responding to the Chinese activities in India's backyard, India's military maritime foray may be an attempt to undo the string of pearls that encircles India currently. Dr Bharat Karnad, a professor at the Centre for Policy Research suggests that India should persuade Hanoi to provide the Cam Ranh Bay as a basing option, to "match Chinese naval presence in Gwadar".⁶⁰ Interestingly, Bharat Karnad described Pakistan as the "Chinese cat's paw" and stated that "the cat can be more effectively dealt with by enabling Vietnam, a smaller but spirited tomcat, to rise militarily as a consequential state in China's immediate neighbourhood".⁶¹

Considering India's decision to remain undeterred by Chinese dissuasion on oil exploration with Vietnam, one may believe that Indo-Vietnam strategic cooperation may indeed be a counter to Sino-Pakistan nexus. It may also be perceived that India's cosy relations with the ASEAN countries and US involvement may prove to be a perfect recipe to deter China. India's activities in the SCS and its growing relations with ASEAN countries may compel China to assuage its activities in the Indian Ocean Region and PoK. Such a deterring setup in the SCS bears the potential of acting as India's bargaining chip during negotiations on the territorial dispute.

Analysing various factors, one can infer that the current India-Vietnam strategic collaboration is no counter to the Sino-Pakistan bond. China and Pakistan by virtue of their occupation of parts of Jammu and Kashmir share a common land border. Their geographical situation, flanking India from two sides provides them with a plethora of options to tie down a common "enemy". Motivated with a common aim to prevent India from becoming a dominant player, both China and Pakistan are uniquely poised to exploit advantages posed by geography and historical linkages to the best of their abilities.

But a strong tie with Vietnam provides India with the option of "counter-encirclement" of China's "string of pearls" strategy. This association with Vietnam should not be viewed in isolation. It is only one part of its elaborate strategic plan of forming friendly relations with South East Asian countries. Increased contact and military to military cooperation with countries like Japan, Australia, the United States and Mongolia is another indicator of this strategy of "counter-encirclement".

Conversely, it may be seen as a tit-for-tat policy in the face of heightened up Chinese activities in India's immediate neighbourhood, both on land and sea. But given that China's rapid military modernisation and growing assertiveness pose a direct challenge to India, such a policy may seem justified. India's burgeoning energy demands also calls for effective investments in the energy rich regions of South East Asia.

Also, India can no longer ignore China's relentless pursuits to establish a foothold in the Indian Ocean Region, which add to its security challenges. With Pakistan's cooperation it has recently sought to undertake port construction projects in Maldives, an island nation to the immediate south-west of the Indian mainland. With berthing facilities in Hambantota, Maldives and Gwadar, the Chinese navy aspires to increase its presence in India's backwaters and also secure its supplies of energy resources from the Middle East countries. Therefore, India's presence in the SCS would add to China's vulnerabilities of keeping its SLOCs secure.

India and Vietnam would have to resolutely foster their relation and take it to a new level of undisputed strategic and defence cooperation. China would remain a defining factor in the future trajectory of Indo-Vietnam relations. Another important factor is India's strategic restraint, which would define the future course of India's presence in the SCS and its alignment with Vietnam. If India eventually sheds its decades old attribute of strategic restraint, a potential Indo-Vietnam strategic cooperation could possibly shape up to counter China's partnership with Pakistan. Conversely, if India continues its reticence in adopting an assertive position, the Indo-Vietnam relation may remain strong on a rhetorical basis but would not be strong enough to counter the Sino-Pakistan partnership.

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