

Thayer Consultancy
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Background Brief:
Vietnam-Russian Relations:
Lavrov visits Hanoi
July 8, 2022

We would like to have your evaluation regarding relations between Vietnam, Russia and China. Russia's top diplomat Sergey Lavrov left Hanoi on July 6 where he and Vietnamese leaders pledged to boost bilateral ties. In Bali where he attended the G-20 summit, Lavrov met with China's top diplomat Wang Yi and they also agreed to accelerate Russia-China ties.

Q1. What is your assessment of these meetings?

ANSWER: Three points are worth noting about Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's two-day visit to Hanoi (5-6 July) and attendance at the G-20 ministerial meeting in Bali.

First, Russia is moving on the diplomatic front to demonstrate that it is not isolated on the international stage. For example, Foreign Minister Lavrov also stopped in Mongolia on his way to Vietnam and Indonesia.

Lavrov billed his visit to Vietnam as part of the normal annual exchange of foreign ministers. He said he was reciprocating the September 2021 visit of Vietnam's foreign minister Bui Thanh Son. Lavrov not only met his Vietnamese counterpart but also Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh and party General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong.

Lavrov's visit was also portrayed as a commemoration of the tenth anniversary of Russia's comprehensive strategic partnership with Vietnam that evolved from their strategic partnership in 2001.

In Vietnam, Lavrov praised Vietnam's balanced approach in not voting for sanctions against Russia at the UN General Assembly. Lavrov stressed ASEAN centrality and Vietnam's role as a bridge to develop the Russia-ASEAN strategic partnership.

Second, Lavrov also delivered a counter-narrative to that the United States and Europe about the war in Ukraine in an attempt to turn the tables against the Zelensky government and puts the blame on the United States and its allies.

Third, Lavrov also seeks to demonstrate that Western sanctions are not having a serious impact on Russia. In Hanoi, Lavrov noted that Vietnamese and Russian companies continue to cooperate despite "illegitimate unilateral sanctions by the US, and EU and their allies in the region." He pointed out that "joint companies that engaged in hydrocarbon production and deliveries to international markets... will remain operational" and that Russia would continue "to create favorable conditions

for the Vietnamese community to live, study and do business in Russia.” Finally, Lavrov also called for the two sides to “continue making efforts for their comprehensive strategic partnership to bear more fruit” in such areas as humanitarian assistance, education, the automotive industry, healthcare, and pharmaceuticals.

When Lavrov met Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh, Chinh proposed that the two sides remove obstacles to trade, investment and transport by utilizing the Eurasian Economic Union-Vietnam Free Trade Agreement. Chinh also suggested that the two sides continue to organize the 24th session of the Vietnam-Russia Inter-Governmental Committee on Economic, Commercial and Scientific-Technological Cooperation to be hosted by Vietnam.

Currently, Russian companies have invested in 151 projects in Vietnam with a total authorised capital of around \$950 million. At the St. Petersburg Economic Forum on 17 June, the Vietnamese delegation discussed cooperation projects with Gazprom, Gazprom Neft and Zarubezhneft. Two-way trade reached \$7.1 billion in 2021 or around one percent of Vietnam’s total trade.

Lavrov’s meeting with his Chinese counterpart, Wang Yi, on the sidelines of the G-20 ministerial meeting in Bali was to demonstrate that the partnership “without limits” was still functioning and both countries were opposed to US and NATO support for Ukraine.

Q2. Will Vietnam-Russia relations help Hanoi to deal with China's hegemony in the South China Sea?

ANSWER: All three of Vietnam’s leaders that met Lavrov stressed Vietnam’s foreign policy of “independence, self-reliance, multilateralization and diversification of relations.” According to Foreign Minister Bui Thanh Son, “Russia is always one of the most important partners in Vietnam’s foreign policy.” Russia is Vietnam’s largest provider of arms and military technology. In other words, Russia forms a vital third link in Vietnam’s relations with China and the United States.

Foreign Minister Lavrov noted that “Vietnam is one of the reliable and important traditional partners of Russia in the Asia-Pacific region.” ITAR-TASS also quoted Lavrov as saying that his talks with Foreign Minister Son “were very timely. They made it possible to outline specific steps to deepen cooperation without exception, including... the field of military and technical cooperation.” Russian Government News also reported that the talks between the two foreign ministers outlined specific steps to deepen cooperation across all areas “without exception, including... defence cooperation.”

In other words, Russia-Vietnam cooperation meets the interest of both parties. Vietnam leverages its relations with Russia to avoid having to make a choice between China and the United States. Lavrov expressed the view that “Vietnam will serve as an important bridge to help Russia further strengthen cooperation with the region, including promoting the ASEAN-Russia strategic partnership.” Russia gains some leverage from its relationship with Vietnam in dealing with China by keeping Vietnam from tilting towards the U.S.

In sum, Russia offers support to Vietnam by providing weapons so Vietnam can defend its maritime claims in the South China Sea. At the same time, Russia can demonstrate

its utility to China by ensuring that Hanoi does not side with United States against Beijing. Vietnam must reinforce its ties to Russia because it is not in Vietnam's interest to see Russia weakened by western sanctions and made dependent on China.

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