

India–Vietnam Defence and Security Cooperation

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Abstract

Defence and security cooperation between India and Vietnam is an increasingly important area of the India–Vietnam ‘comprehensive strategic partnership’. This wide-ranging cooperation includes government-to-government dialogues, bilateral agreements, defence lines of credit, prospective defence procurements, maritime cooperation and multilateral cooperation.

Cooperation has been formalised and expanded through a series of bilateral defence and security agreements to provide a basis for enhancing relations, which have been further developed through regular government-to-government dialogues. The defence and security dialogues and agreements have provided a framework for practical cooperation between the two countries’ militaries, which includes a focus on defence training, military exercises and discussions for the sale of different Indian arms equipment to Vietnam. Maritime cooperation between India and Vietnam has been the most significant element of bilateral defence and security cooperation, and both sides have found mutual convergences on cooperation in the South China Sea and the wider Indo-Pacific region.

Relations between the two countries have also strengthened multilaterally on defence and security issues, including through the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. There are opportunities to further strengthen the India–Vietnam defence and security relationship, both bilaterally and with third countries.

Keywords

Defence, security, maritime, Indo-Pacific, ASEAN, South China Sea

Since India and Vietnam established a ‘strategic partnership’ in 2007, New Delhi’s relations with Hanoi have strengthened significantly across the six priority areas of the bilateral relationship—political visits, economy, trade, science, people-people contact, and defence and security cooperation. 2021 marks the fifth

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anniversary of India–Vietnam relations being upgraded to a ‘comprehensive strategic partnership’ in 2016, with India as one of only three ‘comprehensive strategic partners’ of Vietnam. Within the India–Vietnam partnership, defence and security relations have increased to become a priority area of cooperation.

India–Vietnam defence and security cooperation is wide-ranging and includes government-to-government dialogues, bilateral agreements, defence lines of credit, prospective defence procurements, maritime cooperation and multilateral cooperation, including through the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

Defence and security cooperation between the two countries has been enhanced through an increase in high-level bilateral government visits. From India, following then-defence minister George Fernandes’ visit to Vietnam in March 2000, India’s defence ministers have visited Vietnam in December 2007, October 2010, June 2016, June 2018 and a virtual defence ministerial meeting in November 2020. India’s National Security Advisor (NSA) Ajit Doval visited Vietnam in April 2015.

At the armed forces’ service-level, India’s army chiefs have visited Vietnam in July 2010, December 2014 and November 2018; India’s air force chiefs visited Vietnam in September 2015 and November 2017; and India’s navy chiefs visited Vietnam in December 2003, November 2012 and October 2017.

Defence-related visits from Vietnam have also increased. Vietnam’s Ministers of National Defence visited India in March 2005, November 2009, May 2015 and December 2016 (with his delegation including the Chiefs of the Vietnam’s army, air force and navy). At the armed forces service-level, the Chief of the General Staff of the Vietnamese army visited India in March 2004, September 2013 and November 2019; Vietnam’s air force chief visited India in October 2018; and Vietnam’s navy chiefs visited India in June 2011 and December 2018 (Indian Ministry of Defence [MoD] and Ministry of External Affairs [MEA] Annual Reports from 2000 to 2020).

The high tempo of visits at both the ministerial and service level has helped to establish India–Vietnam defence and security cooperation as an important pillar of the bilateral ‘comprehensive strategic partnership’.

Defence Cooperation Agreements

India–Vietnam defence and security cooperation has increased in scope and depth since the mid-1990s. Cooperation has been formalised and expanded through a series of bilateral defence and security agreements to provide a framework for enhancing relations. India and Vietnam’s defence and security relationship was first expanded in 1994—the year in which then-Prime Minister Narasimha Rao outlined India’s ‘Look East’ policy—when the two sides signed a ‘Protocol on Defence Cooperation Agreement’, focused on ‘military exchanges, visits and training’ (Das, 2013).

Indian defence minister George Fernandes’ visit to Vietnam in March 2000 was the first Indian defence ministerial visit to Vietnam. During the visit, the two

sides signed a 15-point 'Defence Assistance Agreement', which included institutionalising a regular defence ministerial dialogue to share strategic threat perceptions and intelligence; training of Vietnamese air force pilots by the Indian air force; establishing bilateral naval and coast guard exercises; and repair of vessels for the Vietnamese navy and Russian *MiG* aircraft of the Vietnamese air force (Kapila, 2001; Mohan, 2000).

A substantial framework for defence and security cooperation in the wider relationship was established when India and Vietnam signed a 'strategic partnership' agreement in July 2007. In March 2008, India's Ministry of Home Affairs signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on bilateral security cooperation with Vietnam's Ministry of Public Security (MPS), which included a focus on counter-terrorism (*The Economic Times*, 2008).

The most significant agreement for future bilateral defence relations followed in November 2009, when the Indian and Vietnamese defence ministers signed an MoU on 'Defence Cooperation'. The MoU provided the foundation for India–Vietnam defence relations, building upon the bilateral defence agreements of 1994 and 2000. In November 2013, the 2009 MoU was extended for another five years from 2014 to 2019 (Indian MEA, 2014a, p. 23; Indian MoD, 2010, p. 172). The two sides also signed an agreement on the 'Reciprocal Protection of Classified Information Exchanges', to increase information sharing (Indian MEA, 2013a).

Bilateral relations were further strengthened in May 2015, when the then-Vietnamese defence minister and his Indian counterpart Manohar Parrikar, signed a 'Joint Vision Statement on India–Vietnam Defence Relations for the period of 2015–2020'. The statement provided an updated basis for further developing the bilateral defence relationship and is now the primary document that guides India–Vietnam defence relations.

An additional MoU was also signed in May 2015 by the two countries' coast guards, focused on increasing cooperation and combatting transnational crime (Indian MEA, 2016a, p. 35). In December 2016, the Indian and Vietnamese air forces signed a 'programme of cooperation' (Indian MoD, 2017a, p. 175).

The defence agreements were institutionalised when the India–Vietnam relationship was upgraded to a 'comprehensive strategic partnership' in September 2016, during Indian Prime minister Narendra Modi's visit to Vietnam. This will be built upon following the announcement of a 'Plan of Action for period 2021–2023' to guide all areas of the partnership, after the India–Vietnam prime ministers' virtual summit in December 2020 (Indian Embassy in Vietnam, 2020a).

Defence and Security Dialogues

The India–Vietnam defence and security agreements signed since 1994 have provided the basis for cooperation which has been further developed through regular government-to-government dialogues.

In November 2003, Vietnam's Vice Minister of Defence travelled to New Delhi for the first India–Vietnam Security Dialogue. India was represented by its Defence Secretary, with discussions focused on 'imparting training to Vietnamese

defence personnel and the need for increased interaction' between the two countries' navies and coast guard (Indian MoD, 2004, p. 194). The 13th India–Vietnam dialogue took place virtually in January 2021, and was for the first time labelled as a 'Defence Security Dialogue' (Indian MoD, 2021a).

At the armed forces service-level, staff talks have been established between the Indian and Vietnamese army, air force and navy. The first Navy-to-Navy staff talks were held in Vietnam in May 2016; the inaugural Army-to-Army staff talks were held in New Delhi in July 2017; and the first Air Force-to-Air Force and Air Defence Air staff talks were held in New Delhi in March 2018 (Indian MoD, 2017a, p. 175; 2018a, p. 173; 2019a, p. 204).

Security cooperation was strengthened following the signing of an MoU between India's National Security Council Secretariat (NSCS) and Vietnam's MPS in November 2016. The two sides held their first deputy ministerial-level Security Dialogue in July 2018 in Hanoi, between India's Deputy NSA Rajinder Khanna and Vietnam's Vice Minister of Public Security. This dialogue focused on enhancing cooperation on counter-terrorism, cyber security and training programmes (Vietnamese Ministry of Public Security, 2018).

Security relations are also discussed in a 'Strategic Dialogue' between the two government's foreign ministries. The 7th Strategic Dialogue was held in April 2018, which included discussions on maritime security and counter-terrorism cooperation (Indian MEA, 2018a). With maritime cooperation a significant element of the bilateral relationship, the first India–Vietnam Maritime Security Dialogue was held in March 2019 (Indian Embassy in Vietnam, 2021).

Military Exercises and Training

The defence and security dialogues and agreements have provided a framework for practical cooperation between the two countries' militaries, which includes a focus on defence training. The Indian armed forces have engaged in training and capacity building with the Vietnamese armed forces.

Military exercises between the two countries have formed a growing part of the training and capacity building. In January 2018, the Indian and Vietnamese armies held their first exercise, VINBAX, in the Indian state of Madhya Pradesh (*The Economic Times*, 2018). This was followed in May 2018, by the first maritime exercise between the Indian and Vietnamese navies in Da Nang, Vietnam (Indian MoD, 2019b).

During the Indian and Vietnamese defence minister's virtual summit in November 2020, India's defence minister Rajnath Singh stated 'India's willingness to enhance the scope and level of training for all three services' of the Vietnamese armed forces, through training in Indian defence institutes. This includes Indian army, air force and navy mobile training teams being based in Vietnam to provide customised training courses through technical, operational, and English language training to Vietnamese training academies and Vietnam's armed forces' personnel (Indian MoD, 2020).

This has involved Indian training to the Vietnamese armed forces on defence equipment, in addition to the repair of Vietnamese naval vessels and

Russian-origin aircraft of the Vietnamese air force, first announced in 2000. Since October 2013, the Indian navy has trained Vietnamese naval officers in Visakhapatnam, on 'comprehensive underwater combat operations' to help operate and maintain the Vietnamese navy's six *Kilo*-class submarines. The Indian navy also operates eight *Kilo*-class submarines, which both countries procured from Russia (Indian MoD, 2014, p. 35). Additionally, in 2017, the Indian air force began training Vietnamese pilots and helping with maintenance of Vietnam's Russian-origin *Sukhoi*-30MK2 fighter jets—a variant of the *Sukhoi*-30MKI that the Indian air force operates (IISS, 2021; Pandit, 2017).

Additional training of Vietnamese defence personnel takes place in Indian defence institutes. The Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) assistance programme offers 60–70 slots every year to Vietnamese defence personnel (Indian MEA, 2019, p. 83). Vietnamese armed forces personnel have also trained at various Indian defence institutes, including the Indian National Defence Academy, Air Force Academy, Defence Services Staff College and National Defence College (Indian MoD, 2017b).

Bilateral defence training also occurs through the training of personnel for participation in United Nations (UN) peacekeeping operations. This has included India sending mobile training teams to the Vietnamese Centre for Peace Keeping in Hanoi to train the Vietnamese army. This was formalised in December 2020, following the signing of an 'Implementing Arrangement' to identify activities for cooperation in UN peacekeeping (Indian Embassy in Vietnam, 2020b).

Areas of Military Cooperation

Alongside the defence training aspects, the two countries also engage in practical cooperation on defence and security issues, ranging from counter-terrorism, to cyber, to space, to civil nuclear—through their dialogues and military exercises. On counter-terrorism and counter-extremism, the two sides have called for 'early adoption of the Comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism (CCIT)'; and India has helped to modernise the Vietnamese police force (Indian Embassy in Vietnam, 2020c). India and Vietnam have also cooperated on civil nuclear issues, following the signing of an agreement between two governments in August 2017, on 'Cooperation in the Peaceful Uses of Nuclear Energy' (Indian MEA, 2018b, p. 315).

Cyber-security cooperation is a growing element of the bilateral defence relationship. In September 2016, India and Vietnam signed an MoU on cyber security. Prime Minister Modi also announced a grant of US\$5 million for the construction of an Army Software Park in Vietnam's Telecommunications University in Nha Trang. Additionally, in 2016, India transferred equipment to the Indian-funded Indira Gandhi High-Tech Cyber Forensic Laboratory in Hanoi. India has also established an English and IT Training Centre at Vietnam's National Defence Academy (Indian MEA, 2013b, 2016b).

Space cooperation between India and Vietnam was enhanced following the signing in September 2016, of a 'Framework Agreement on Cooperation in the

Exploration and Uses of Outer Space for Peaceful Purposes'. India and Vietnam have also agreed to collaborate in satellite construction, for civilian and non-civilian uses (Indian MEA, 2016b).

Furthermore, cooperation between Indian and Vietnamese defence industries has been a growing area of defence engagement, to explore possibilities of co-production of defence equipment as well as potential transfer of technology. In June 2018, then-defence minister Nirmala Sitharaman inaugurated the first representative export office of India's Bharat Electronics (BEL) in Hanoi, during an India–Vietnam defence industry business meeting. Sitharaman outlined that there was 'immense scope in the co-production of platform, spares, and repair and overhaul services'. During the ceremony, the Vietnamese deputy defence minister invited Indian defence companies to open offices in Vietnam with the intent of supplying to India, Vietnam and third countries (Indian MoD, 2018b; Outlook India, 2018).

Defence industry cooperation was further augmented in December 2020, when India and Vietnam signed an 'Implementing Arrangement', to 'provide a framework for promoting cooperation between the defence industries of the two countries'. India's ability to support the development of Vietnam's defence industry, is a growing element of the bilateral relationship, with Indian defence minister Rajnath Singh's aim of a US\$26bn defence industry in India by 2025, and India setting a target of US\$5bn worth of defence exports by 2024 (Indian Embassy in Vietnam, 2020b; Roy-Chaudhury & Solanki, 2020, p. 178).

Defence Line of Credits (LoCs)

Cooperation between the two country's defence industries has also formed part of two defence LoCs provided by India to Vietnam. In October 2011, during the visit of the then-Vietnamese president to New Delhi, India offered Vietnam a US\$100mn LoC for procurement of 12 offshore high-speed patrol boats from India, developed by the Indian defence company Larsen & Toubro (L&T). An MoU on the US\$100mn LoC was signed in September 2014 (Indian MEA, 2013c, 2014b, 2016b, 2018b, p. 37).

In December 2020, under the US\$100mn LoC, India implemented a 'High-Speed Guard Boat (HSGB)' manufacturing project for the Vietnam Border Guard Command; handed over one completed HSGB to Vietnam; announced the 'launch of two HSGBs manufactured in India; and the keel-laying of seven HSGBs to be manufactured in Vietnam', with L&T offering expertise, engineering and design (Indian Embassy in Vietnam, 2020b).

Additionally, in September 2016, Prime Minister Modi announced a second defence LoC of US\$500mn for defence industry cooperation. Negotiations on the framework for this LoC were concluded by January 2021, as 'an important element for maritime capacity building cooperation between the two countries' (Indian MEA, 2016c; Pukhrem, 2021).

Defence Procurements

Alongside the defence procurements agreed between the two countries as part of the defence LoC, India and Vietnam have also held discussions for the sale of different Indian arms equipment to Vietnam. Both India and Vietnam operate different defence equipment procured from Russia, which has provided opportunities for training and potential defence sales between India and Vietnam's armed forces.

Since 2014, India offered the *BrahMos* anti-ship cruise missile to Vietnam. This has included talks on stationing an Indian team of technicians in Vietnam to assist the Vietnamese military on the *BrahMos*, a missile which India co-developed with Russia. New Delhi and Moscow had also reportedly agreed on procedures for India to transfer the *BrahMos* missile—or transfer technology—to Vietnam, as 60% of the *BrahMos* missiles are imported from Russia (Bedi, 2020; Pandit, 2017).

Additionally, since 2016, India and Vietnam have discussed the possible sale of India's *Akash* surface-to-air missile system to Vietnam, which is developed by BEL, under the US\$500mn LoC. In December 2020, the Indian government approved the export of the *Akash* missile system. With the *Akash* missile having over 96% indigenisation, India would be able to transfer this missile system to Vietnam, without having to consult Russia, as is the case with the *BrahMos* missile.

Under the US\$500mn LoC, Hanoi has also expressed interest in procuring India's indigenously developed *Dhruv* advanced light helicopter; and India has also offered the possible sale of the *Varunastra* anti-submarine torpedo (Pandit, 2017; Peri, 2017). Since 2018, India has discussed assisting Vietnam in weaponising two of its five *Project 159*-class corvettes—which Vietnam procured from Russia—for an anti-submarine role. India had previously provided spares for the corvettes (Pubby, 2018). However, questions remain whether Vietnamese procurement of any of the listed Indian defence equipment will occur, as no agreement had been finalised, as of April 2021, despite extended talks.

Maritime Cooperation

Discussions on potential defence procurements have formed part of the basis for maritime cooperation between India and Vietnam, which has been the most significant element of bilateral defence and security cooperation. This wide-ranging cooperation now includes a maritime security dialogue, naval exercises, ship visits and coast guard cooperation, in addition to training.

The Indian navy has trained Vietnamese naval officers in Visakhapatnam on 'submarine mechanical and electrical repairs' and sent a technical team to Vietnam in November 2015 for repair and maintenance of Vietnamese ships (Indian MoD, 2019a, p. 37, 2016a, p. 33). Furthermore, training of Vietnamese naval officers takes place in India's defence institutes. Vietnamese naval officers have graduated

as observers from the Indian navy Foreign Observer Course in Kochi—with training on air navigation and maritime reconnaissance—as well as participating in the Indian navy's Regional Maritime Security Course (Indian MoD, 2019c).

To enhance cooperation on issues including security of sea lanes and anti-piracy, two important areas of maritime cooperation have been added since 2018. In May 2018, the Indian and Vietnamese navies held their first bilateral maritime exercise in Da Nang, to enhance interoperability and share best practices between the two navies, during Indian navy deployments to Southeast Asia. Three Indian naval ships participated in the exercise.

Secondly, to formalise maritime security cooperation between the two governments, the first India–Vietnam Maritime Security Dialogue was held at the additional secretary-level in Hanoi in March 2019. In April 2019, India and Vietnam held their second bilateral maritime exercise in Cam Ranh Bay, Vietnam. Two Indian navy ships participated in the exercise.

Subsequently, in December 2020, the two navies conducted a naval passage exercise in the South China Sea, during the visit of an Indian naval ship to Ho Chi Minh city, where the ship also delivered 15 tonnes of humanitarian assistance relief materials for Vietnamese people affected by flooding (Indian Embassy in Vietnam, 2020d). The joint exercises have taken place following regular ship visits and port calls by the Indian navy to Vietnam, to enhance maritime cooperation, including on search and rescue procedures. In April 2021, the second India-Vietnam Maritime Security Dialogue was held virtually (Indian MEA, 2021).

Additionally, the Indian and Vietnamese navies both participate in multilateral naval exercises. Vietnam has actively participated in the Indian navy-hosted Milan multilateral exercise held at Port Blair in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. Vietnam first sent a representative to the Milan exercise in 2008, and similarly in 2010. Vietnam's next participation in the biennial exercise was in 2018, when a Vietnamese Rear Admiral met with the Commander-in-Chief of India's Andaman and Nicobar Command. Vietnam was also scheduled to participate in the 2020 Milan exercise, postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Indian MoD, 2009, p. 37).

Furthermore, for the first time, a Vietnamese frigate participated in the Indian navy-hosted International Fleet Review—2016, held in Vishakhapatnam in February 2016 (Indian MoD, 2017b). Vietnam was also one of 18 foreign observers at an Indian navy exercise Sambandh, held in October 2017 (Indian MoD, 2018a, p. 34).

India and Vietnam have also both participated in multilateral naval exercises held by third countries, including the U.S. navy-hosted Rim of the Pacific naval exercise, the Australian navy-hosted exercise Kakadu, and the Indonesian navy-hosted humanitarian assistance and disaster relief-focused (HADR) exercise Komodo.

To enhance dialogue on maritime security issues between the three services and building upon bilateral visits by Indian and Vietnamese navy chiefs, the first Navy-to-Navy staff talks were held in Vietnam in May 2016, at the rear admiral-level. The talks included discussion on training, submarine cooperation, ship repairs and sharing of white shipping information (Indian Navy, 2016a).

Subsequently, in September 2016, India and Vietnam signed an agreement on 'Sharing of White Shipping Information', to enhance the two navy's maritime domain awareness. The agreement has since been operationalised (Indian MEA, 2016b). Four India–Vietnam navy staff talks have been held, with the fourth meeting taking place in New Delhi in December 2019.

On the sidelines of ship visits, India and Vietnam have held a maritime defence industry workshop to strengthen defence industry cooperation, and Vietnam also participated in the Indian navy's Maritime Information Sharing Workshop in 2019 (*Financial Express*, 2019; Indian MEA, 2018b, p. 37). In November 2020, the two sides signed an implementing arrangement for hydrography cooperation, to enable sharing of hydrographic data (Indian MoD, 2020).

Cooperation between the Indian and Vietnamese coast guards is also a growing element of the bilateral maritime relationship. Notably, the Indian and Vietnamese coast guards signed an MoU in May 2015, for the 'Establishment of Collaborative Relationship to Combat Transnational Crime and Develop Mutual Cooperation'.

This was followed in October 2018 by the first visit of a Vietnamese coast guard ship to India for the inaugural India–Vietnam coast guard exercise in Chennai—which was also the first time that a Vietnamese coast guard ship had sailed outside of Vietnam's immediate neighbourhood (Indian MEA, 2019, p. 83; Indian MoD, 2019a, p. 52). Indian coast guard ships have made regular ship visits to Vietnam, since 2001. The ship visits have included participating in joint search and rescue drills, and in 2018, India and Vietnam conducted a search and rescue communication exercise (Indian MoD, 2019a, p. 54).

Based on the 2015 MoU, the two coast guards also hold an annual high-level meeting, led by the Director-General of the Indian coast guard and his Vietnamese counterpart. The latest meeting took place in December 2020, with discussions focusing on combatting 'transnational crime, capacity building and ships visits' (ANI News, 2020).

Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific Region

As maritime cooperation between the Indian and Vietnamese navies and coast guards has deepened, both sides have found mutual convergences on cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region. With India seeking to implement its 'Act East' policy, by strengthening ties with Southeast Asian nations, it has increased its engagement with Vietnam.

India and Vietnam's enhanced relations have come at a time of increased tensions in both country's bilateral relations with neighbouring China. India–China tensions increased in 2020, following clashes on the Line of Actual Control (LAC), while tensions between Vietnam and China have grown in the South China Sea. There have been objections from China to the growing India–Vietnam strategic partnership. In November 2017, an article in the *Global Times*, the Chinese Communist Party newspaper, stated that 'if the Indian government genuinely treats its enhancement of military relations with Vietnam as a strategic

arrangement or even revenge against Beijing, it will only create disturbances in the region and China will hardly sit with its arms crossed' (Jun, 2017).

As both India and Vietnam contend with increasing tensions with Beijing, there has been a convergence of views on the principles of the Indo-Pacific. This was highlighted in the India–Vietnam joint vision statement, released following the Indian and Vietnamese prime minister's virtual summit in December 2020. The vision statement noted that the two sides will 'work together towards the shared objective of a peaceful, stable, secure, free, open, inclusive and rules-based Indo-Pacific region'. The document noted that this took place amidst an 'emerging geopolitical and geoeconomic landscape in the region and beyond', although China was not explicitly named as a common challenge (Indian Embassy in Vietnam, 2020c).

Vietnam's ambassador to India has also stated that Vietnam 'serves as a bridge between India and ASEAN, helping India extend its reach beyond the Indian Ocean' (Pukhrem, 2021). Notably, Vietnam hosted the third Indian Ocean Conference in Hanoi in August 2018, which saw the participation of senior government officials from across the Indian Ocean region, including the Indian foreign minister.

Additionally, Vietnam is part of a 'Quad-Plus' dialogue, at the foreign secretary-level, initiated by the United States since early 2020. The dialogue included the four members of the Quad group—India, United States, Japan, and Australia—along with South Korea and New Zealand. Although the meetings were focused on recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, there is an opportunity to expand the conversation in future dialogues to include defence and security issues in the Indo-Pacific region (Indian MEA, 2020).

There are similarities in India and Vietnam's policy approaches in the region. Vietnam operates a 'three-nos' national security policy—based on no military alliances, no foreign military bases on Vietnamese soil, and no aligning with one country against another (Grossman & Huynh, 2019). India operates a similar policy, but New Delhi has abandoned its rhetorical position of non-alignment, preferring to focus on an 'issue-based alignment', according to India's then-foreign secretary Vijay Gokhale. This provides opportunities for increased convergence between the two countries on issues of common concern in the Indo-Pacific region.

Cooperation in the South China Sea

A notable issue in which the two countries are aligned in their views is on the South China Sea. The Indian navy's 2015 maritime security strategy highlighted the South China Sea as a 'secondary area of maritime interest' for India (Indian Navy, 2015). For Vietnam, maritime disputes with China in the South China Sea have been a major reason for tensions between Hanoi and Beijing, as an area of core interest for both countries. Vietnam's coastline bordering the South China Sea is over 3,000 km long, and its exclusive economic zone (EEZ) also covers parts of the South China Sea. Vietnam believes that it has 'sufficient legal basis to

assert its sovereignty' over the Paracel and Spratly islands in the South China Sea, 'in accordance with international law' (Pukhrem, 2021).

Beijing has also claimed the waters as an area of high strategic importance through its nine-dash line claim and has undertaken 'aggressive' actions to claim control of the waters. Tensions heightened in 2014, when a Chinese-operated oil rig entered Vietnam's EEZ. China's rejection of the July 2016 ruling in favour of the Philippines in its arbitration case against China under Annex VII to the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of Sea (UNCLOS)—due to Beijing's territorial claims in the South China Sea—has also been a source of tension between Vietnam and China (Thu, 2020).

India and Vietnam have consistently and publicly aligned their views on resolving disputes in the South China Sea, although India has stated that it is not a party to the dispute. In the December 2020 India–Vietnam joint vision statement, the two prime ministers called for 'maintaining peace, stability, security and freedom of navigation and overflight in the South China Sea, while pursuing the peaceful resolution of disputes in accordance with international law, particularly the 1982 UNCLOS, without resorting to threat or use of force'.

Both leaders also called for the 'full and effective implementation of the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea in its entirety and the substantive negotiations towards the early conclusion of a substantive and effective Code of Conduct in the South China Sea'. The first paragraph in the vision document highlighted a 'shared commitment to international law' (Indian Embassy in Vietnam, 2020c).

India and Vietnam have consistently called for maintaining a rules-based order in the region by adhering to international law, ensuring 'unimpeded economic activities in the South China Sea' (Indian MEA, 2018c). India's experience in resolving maritime disputes peacefully, for example with Bangladesh, has also been an area that Hanoi has sought to learn best practices from New Delhi.

Indian Oil and Gas Exploration in the South China Sea

Another area of convergence between India and Vietnam has been through Indian oil and gas exploration in the South China Sea, where India seeks to enhance its energy security requirements. India and Vietnam have been engaged in exploration activity in blocks off the coast of Vietnam since 1988, when ONGC Videsh Ltd (OVL), the overseas arm of India's Oil and Natural Gas Corporation (ONGC), signed a production sharing contract with PetroVietnam for exploration in Vietnam's Block 6.1—currently producing natural gas (Indian Ministry of Petroleum & Natural Gas, 2002).

Subsequently, in April 1999, OVL signed two agreements for the launch of a US\$1.5 billion Vietnam gas production project, alongside BP and Statoil. This was followed by an agreement in September 1999 by OVL and PetroVietnam, where OVL was assigned an initial 10% stake for offshore gas discovered at Vietnam's Lan Tay and Lan Do offshore gas fields (Indian MEA, 2000, p. 21).

Following this, in May 2006, OVL signed a production sharing contract for a 100% operating stake in two further Vietnamese exploration blocks—Block 127 and Block 128. However, Block 127 was relinquished due to poor prospects, after OVL invested US\$51mn in the block. Block 128 remains under exploration with investment of over US\$50mn (ONGC, 2013, 2014a).

In November 2013, OVL and PetroVietnam signed an MoU for new investments in Vietnam's oil and gas blocks, with PetroVietnam offering OVL five additional blocks for oil and gas exploration and production. This built upon an agreement signed by the two sides in October 2011. PetroVietnam was invited to participate in open blocks in India and in third countries (Indian MEA, 2013a; ONGC, 2013). In September 2014, OVL and PetroVietnam signed a 'Letter of Intent' which provided for the expansion of exploration activities by OVL in Vietnam in 2–3 additional blocks, and PetroVietnam considered participation in OVL exploration blocks (ONGC, 2014a).

This was followed, in October 2014, by the two sides signing an additional MoU for exploration in OVL's blocks in the Bay of Bengal. OVL and PetroVietnam also signed a 'Heads of Agreement' for exploration in PetroVietnam's Blocks 102/10 and 106/10, and OVL's Block 128 off Vietnam. The agreement emphasised Vietnam's invitation for OVL to expand its presence in Vietnam (ONGC, 2014b).

By May 2019, when India's vice president visited Vietnam, OVL had invested more than US\$530mn in oil and gas exploration in Vietnam and was exploring the possibility of an additional gas discovery which would require investment of US\$136mn. India's vice president sought an extension of up to 10 years for OVL's contract in Vietnam, due to expire in 2023; and an extension of the production sharing contract for Block 128 by PetroVietnam for an additional two years from June 2019, which was subsequently signed (Indian Vice President, 2019).

However, China has objected to India and Vietnam's hydrocarbon exploration in the contested areas of the South China Sea. In September 2011, China issued a demarche to India over Vietnam's decision to allow OVL exploration in blocks 127 and 128, stating that this was 'illegal and violated China's sovereignty'. In 2012, OVL briefly exited Block 128, reportedly due to Chinese pressure (Clark, 2017; Haidar, 2014). In December 2020, a senior Chinese academic published an article stating that India's oil and gas cooperation with Vietnam, was a 'chip to counter China on the land boundary issue' (Zongyi, 2020). India has reiterated that OVL's exploration is 'purely commercial in nature' and takes place in Vietnam's EEZ and continental shelf (Indian MEA, 2014c).

Multilateral Cooperation via ASEAN

As India and Vietnam have expanded their bilateral defence and security cooperation, relations between the two countries have also strengthened multilaterally. Vietnam's membership of ASEAN has provided additional opportunities for India and Vietnam to meet bilaterally. The Vietnamese prime minister joined ASEAN leaders in attending India's Republic Day celebrations in January 2018. During this visit, Vietnam's prime minister met with both India's prime minister and president.

In the Indo-Pacific region, India emphasised ‘ASEAN centrality and unity’ when Prime Minister Modi officially articulated India’s Indo-Pacific policy for the first time in his keynote address at the International Institute for Strategic Studies’ annual Shangri-La dialogue in Singapore in June 2018 (Indian MEA, 2018d).

India and Vietnam have subsequently highlighted the convergences between India’s Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI)—a maritime-focused initiative outlined by Prime Minister Modi in November 2019 at the East Asia Summit (EAS)—and the ASEAN Outlook on Indo-Pacific, released in June 2019. During the December 2020 virtual summit, India, and Vietnam’s prime ministers emphasised cooperation through the two Indo-Pacific documents, with a focus on ASEAN centrality (Indian Embassy in Vietnam, 2020c). The ASEAN and Indian Indo-Pacific outlooks have provided an additional basis for India and Vietnam to strengthen their maritime security cooperation.

Multilateral cooperation between the two countries expanded in 2020, when Vietnam was the ASEAN Chair. In this role, Vietnam’s Prime Minister Chaired the 15th EAS—with participation from India’s foreign minister—as well as the 17th ASEAN-India prime ministerial summit in November 2020, where Prime Minister Modi emphasised the centrality of ASEAN in India’s ‘Act East’ Policy. The multilateral ASEAN meetings provided India and Vietnam an additional platform to discuss shared security concerns, including on the South China Sea.

On defence issues, India’s relations with Vietnam have also grown through India’s membership of the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus). The ADMM-Plus is a platform for ASEAN and eight dialogue partners, including India and China, to discuss regional security issues. The in-person meetings of the ADMM-Plus have provided an additional opportunity for India and Vietnam’s defence ministers to meet. The first meeting was convened in 2010, and the grouping has met annually since 2017. The focus of the ADMM-Plus is cooperation in seven key areas, including maritime security, counter-terrorism, HADR and cyber security.

The ADMM-Plus meetings have also provided a platform for Indian and Vietnamese defence ministers to raise issues of concern, including on the South China Sea. In the 7th ADMM-Plus meeting, Chaired by Vietnam in December 2020, India’s defence minister ‘reiterated India’s support to freedom of navigation and over-flight for all in International waters in accordance’ with UNCLOS (Indian Embassy in Vietnam, 2020e).

India–Vietnam defence cooperation has been strengthened through the ADMM-Plus Experts’ Working Groups (EWG). From 2014 to 2017, India and Vietnam co-chaired the EWG on ‘Humanitarian Mine Action’. The two countries have also coordinated practically through ADMM-Plus field training exercises. In March 2016, India hosted ‘Exercise Force 18’, with ADMM-Plus members—the exercise was the largest ground forces exercise conducted in India—focused on Indian army training on ‘Humanitarian Mine Action’ and ‘Peacekeeping Operations’. The Deputy Chief of General Staff from Vietnam’s army (equivalent to India’s army chief) travelled to India to witness the exercise (Indian MoD, 2016b). India and Vietnam’s navies also participated in the ADMM-Plus maritime

security and counter-terrorism exercise in the South China Sea in May 2016 (Indian Navy, 2016b).

India's engagement with ASEAN has also enabled India and Vietnam to expand their defence and security cooperation into new areas, including space cooperation. In March 2016, the Indian government announced that the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) was establishing a 'Satellite Tracking and Data Reception Station and Data Processing Facility' in Vietnam for ASEAN member states. Indian Remote Sensing Satellite data related to the ASEAN region would be acquired and processed at the station and sent to ASEAN countries, who were each allowed to access data relating to their country (Indian Department of Space, 2016).

Beyond ASEAN, opportunities for India and Vietnam's multilateral cooperation will occur in the UN Security Council (UNSC), where both India and Vietnam will serve concurrently as non-permanent members in 2021. This will provide a platform for India and Vietnam to engage further on shared defence and security issues.

Conclusion

Defence and security cooperation between India and Vietnam is an increasingly important element of the bilateral 'comprehensive strategic partnership'. This wide-ranging cooperation covers bilateral dialogues and agreements, defence lines of credit, prospective defence procurements, maritime cooperation and multilateral cooperation, through ASEAN and the UNSC.

There are opportunities to further strengthen the India–Vietnam defence and security relationship, both bilaterally and with third countries. Bilaterally, the two countries are reportedly in discussions, as of April 2021, over establishing a mutual logistics support agreement, to facilitate access to military facilities of the two countries. For the Indian navy, this would extend its strategic and naval operational outreach in the Indian Ocean and wider Indo-Pacific region.

The Indian and Vietnamese prime minister's joint vision in December 2020, noted that 'mutual logistics support' will allow the two countries to 'further institutionalize defence exchanges' (Indian Embassy in Vietnam, 2020c). If the two countries were to sign such an agreement, Vietnam would join the United States, Australia, Japan, France, South Korea and Singapore, in signing a logistics agreement with India; and India is also in discussion with Russia and the UK. However, under a logistics agreement, there may be limits to the Indian navy's access to Vietnamese bases, beyond for refuelling of ships and port calls, due to Vietnam's national security policy, which includes 'no foreign military bases'.

India and Vietnam's bilateral cooperation could also be strengthened through trilateral engagement with Japan, with Tokyo strengthening ties with Hanoi. Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga's first overseas visit after taking office was to Vietnam in October 2020. During the visit, the Japanese and Vietnamese prime ministers agreed to enhance defence and security cooperation, including

through an agreement for Japan to supply Vietnam with defence equipment and technology. With India's own relations with Japan also strengthening, this provides an opportunity for India, Japan, and Vietnam to engage trilaterally on defence and security issues, for example, through trilateral naval exercises to enhance maritime cooperation between the three navies.

As India and Vietnam seek to further strengthen their bilateral defence relationship, an extension of the 'Joint Vision Statement on India–Vietnam Defence Relations for the period of 2015–2020', for another five years until 2025, will provide the basis for priority areas of engagement, to ensure that India–Vietnam defence and security relations continue to form an important and wide-ranging area of cooperation in the bilateral 'comprehensive strategic partnership'.

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