

# India-Vietnam defense ties on upswing as both eye China

**Countries aim to bolster South China Sea security with logistics pact**

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NEW DELHI -- India and Vietnam are stepping up defense cooperation, aiming for an extra layer of security as China flexes its muscle in the South China Sea.

In June, the two countries inked a memorandum of understanding on mutual logistics support, enabling their militaries to use each other's bases for repair and replenishment of supplies. India's Ministry of Defense pointed out that this was a milestone for Hanoi, saying it was "the first such major agreement which Vietnam has signed with any country."

The two governments, which have had a comprehensive strategic partnership since 2016, also signed a joint vision statement on enhancing the "scope and scale" of existing Indo-Vietnamese defense cooperation by 2030. In addition, they are working to expand their ties in line with India's Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations' Outlook on the Indo-Pacific.

Vietnam is "concerned about the Chinese aggressiveness in the South China Sea as well as its militarization," Srikanth Kondapalli, a professor of Chinese studies at New Delhi-based Jawaharlal Nehru University, told Nikkei Asia. "They think that they need to have other like-minded countries to come together" in the sea, where Hanoi has territorial disputes with Beijing.

He contended that from Vietnam's perspective, India is seen as a "better bet" than many other nations with which Hanoi has historical issues, including the U.S. because of the Vietnam War.

India, which has its own troubles with China in a lingering Himalayan border standoff, also has oil exploration projects in Vietnamese waters. Beijing, which claims almost all of the South China Sea, has often voiced objection to India's state-run company ONGC Videsh's drilling activities in the contested area.

During his visit to Vietnam on June 8-10, Indian Defense Minister Rajnath Singh also gave Hanoi 12 high-speed guard boats constructed under New Delhi's \$100 million line of credit. India has announced another \$500 million credit line to help boost Vietnam's defense capabilities, and the two sides are working on its early finalization.

"Our close defense and security cooperation is an important factor of stability in the Indo-Pacific region," Singh tweeted after talks with his Vietnamese counterpart, Phan Van Giang.

A Vietnamese defense ministry statement on Singh's visit said the two sides shared their views "on the significance of maintaining peace, stability, maritime and aviation security, safety and freedom" in the South China Sea, as well as the settlement of disputes through peaceful measures in line with international law, including the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea.

N.C. Bipindra, a defense and strategic affairs expert and editor of the news portal Defence.Capital, said both India and Vietnam view China's "expansionist tendencies as a challenge," underpinning their moves toward closer defense cooperation.

On the Indo-Vietnamese logistics support agreement -- similar to ones India already has with partners including Japan and the U.S. -- he said the accord would make it easier to arrange visits of warships, military aircraft and personnel to each other's shores. It will also ensure replenishment of food and fuel, spare supplies and weapon stores, as well as repairs and maintenance.

"The pact, obviously, ramps up cooperation between the two nations by a few notches," Bipindra said.

According to Ha Hoang Hop, a visiting senior fellow at Singaporean research group ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, the India-Vietnam defense cooperation adds to capabilities to maintain security in the region and should help deter Chinese attempts to change the status quo in the South China Sea.

But uncertainty remains. "It is not clear [whether] India would be a security player in the South China Sea or not and by what extent India would contribute to the Indo-Pacific region with a focus [on the] South China Sea," Hop said.

India has been taking steps to further boost ties with Southeast Asian countries since Prime Minister Narendra Modi came to power in 2014, including through enhanced bilateral visits and military engagements.

"India conducts military exercises with Singapore, Thailand, Malaysia, Vietnam and the Philippines, so things are expanding [with ASEAN]," Kondapalli of JNU observed, while warning that "cosmetic" moves would unlikely be enough to deter China.

"It does provide some kind of a leverage for ASEAN countries to tell the Chinese that we have friends, but that is still not enough," he said. "It is finally the Americans that have to come to their rescue [as] India doesn't have that kind of power to stop the Chinese in the ASEAN region."