

Vietnam's Regional Security Perceptions and Priorities: Role of India

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Abstract

Over the past several decades, India and Vietnam have consolidated their relationship through bilateral engagements, which have been complemented by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)-led multilateral mechanisms such as the East Asia Summit, ASEAN Regional Forum, ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus and the India-led Mekong–Ganga Cooperation (MGC). Building up on their traditionally strong relations, India and Vietnam have widened and deepened their defence and strategic links in recent years, which is manifested in joint trainings, military exercises and defence Lines of Credit offered by India. Since the 1990s, especially over the last decade, both India and Vietnam have made strategic readjustments to elevate their respective bilateral ties with like-minded countries bringing about new commonalities in their politico-strategic visions and policies. Like India, Vietnam too is trying to bring the multilateral and multi-dimensional Indo-Pacific agenda to the mainstream of its foreign policy calculations, facilitated by greater warmth in ties with Japan and the US. Vietnam's embracing of the Indo-Pacific is also in sync with ASEAN's Outlook on Indo-Pacific. It also aligns well with Vietnam's long-standing policy of 'Three Nos', expanded to four in its 2019 Defence White Paper. While recent developments in the South China Sea have exacerbated Vietnam's growing anxieties vis-à-vis China, considering its trade interlinkages and dependence on China (and Russia), it is apparent that Vietnam is not yet ready to uproot its multilayered linkages with China and get on board the 'Quad Plus' initiative that is perceived as an overtly anti-China coalition of democracies. India–Vietnam ties, therefore, must rely on the bilateral plank along with ASEAN-linked mechanisms, MGC and the Indo-Pacific construct while trying to develop concerted actions through deeper cooperation with Japan and the US. In short, any initiative to include Vietnam in a Quad Plus mechanism without sufficiently developing synergies with individual countries would not yield desired outcomes. This article argues that India–Vietnam ties would benefit most by attaching their bilateral pillar of relationship with the ASEAN- and Indo-Pacific-centred inclusive multilateral mechanisms while gradually engaging the US, Japan and other potential partners in suitable frameworks.

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Keywords

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Introduction

India–Vietnam relations are rooted deep in history, dating back to more than two millennia. Starting from the Champa Kingdom, perhaps even earlier, to the Act East policy through the Colonial, post-Colonial, Cold War and post-Cold War phases, these waves of India's engagement with Vietnam and other countries of Southeast Asia have achieved several important milestones in history (Muni & Mishra, 2019).¹ In modern times, India and Vietnam established their diplomatic ties in 1972. Prior to that, India had Consulate-level ties with the North as well as the South Vietnam.

India's unwavering support to Vietnam and strength of India–Vietnam bilateral ties is manifested in its support to Vietnam during the Vietnam War (1955–1975) involving the US. India played a key role in facilitating the peace process in Vietnam. Its role as the Chair of the International Commission for Supervision and Control (ICSC), formed pursuant to the Geneva Accord of 1954, was significant (Muni & Mishra, 2019). One of the most popular and fondly remembered episodes in India–Vietnam relations is from the year 1979 when China attacked Vietnam. The then Indian External Affairs Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, who was visiting China at that point, cut his visit short in solidarity with Vietnam and against China's unlawful aggression. India's support to Vietnam during the Cambodian conflict (1978) cost it dearly—delaying New Delhi's engagement with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) by more than a decade. Nevertheless, the Cold War years bear testimony to strong India–Vietnam ties, which have gained more strength since India launched its Look East policy in 1992, which was revised and upgraded to the Act East policy in 2014.

India–Vietnam ties gained more strength with Vietnam joining the ASEAN in July 1995. India became a Sectoral Dialogue Partner of ASEAN in 1992 and was elevated to the Full Dialogue Partner status in December 1995. ASEAN and its affiliate mechanisms brought India and Vietnam closer as they tried to situate their relations in the wider post-Cold War Southeast Asian context and in relations to the changing realities of the regional strategic milieu.

The ASEAN Regional Forum, ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting (ADMM) Plus, East Asia Summit (EAS) and ASEAN+1 summit involving India and 10 ASEAN countries all provided the much-needed impetus to India–Vietnam relations. Over these years, India's own Mekong–Ganga Initiative, along with Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) and recent Ayeyawady–Chao Phraya–Mekong Economic Cooperation Strategy have provided important sub-regional, regional and inter-regional multilateral platforms to the two countries in bringing relations to the next level. While the bilateral component is going strong, Indo-Pacific has opened new avenues for the two to cooperate and engage in a wider platform.

Making Sense of Vietnam's Regional Security Priorities and Concerns

Vietnam's security is tied to the Southeast Asian strategic equilibrium that not only involves the ASEAN member countries but also China, the US and other important regional stakeholders including India. For Vietnam, joining the ASEAN was a landmark event. Arguably, ever since Vietnam joined the ASEAN, it has been trying its best to project an image of a responsible member that has not shown any digression from the ASEAN principles and also used multilateral platform to resolve disputes. Even on the question of South China Sea dispute and the China threat emanating from the ongoing dispute and protracted boundary-bred hostility, Vietnam has exercised caution by sticking to the ASEAN norms. Vietnam is a signatory to the ASEAN-China *Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea* signed on 17 October 2012 (ASEAN, 2012). Vietnam, along with other ASEAN member countries, has been trying to negotiate a binding code of conduct (COC) on South China Sea, albeit unsuccessfully.

Vietnam is mindful of the fact that its economic security and prosperity is closely linked to China. With US\$ 133 billion trade volume in 2020, China was Vietnam's largest trading partner. It is also the second biggest export market for China (VN Express, 2021). Vietnam's relations with China are much more complicated than they seem. China and Vietnam have several commonalities and a strong shared history. 'Though Vietnam and China have for years been embroiled in a dispute over the South China Sea, China remains the largest source of materials and equipment for Vietnam's thriving manufacturing industry' (Khanh, 2021). Vietnam has benefited a lot from China's economic rise as also from the US-China trade war (South China Morning Post, 2019).

That said, it is beyond doubt that for Vietnam, China is the biggest external source of national security threat. Keeping in view the power differential, Vietnam keeps its South China Sea policy as defensive and reactive as possible in contrast to China, which has been proactive and offensive (Hung, 2016). A careful observation of Vietnamese foreign policy makes it clear that it does not want to go in for an out-and-out confrontation with China. Unlike the Philippines that filed a case against China in the International Court of Justice over the South China Sea issue, Vietnam has preferred to maintain the status quo. Instead of going for escalation with China, Vietnam attempted to address Chinese aggression through a three-pronged strategy: accommodating China's security interests, building its self-defence capacity and seeking regional and international support (Hung, 2016).

The party-to-party linkages between the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) have traditionally been strong. The partly linkages and now the trade dependence on China are among the major reasons why Vietnam has not openly pursued any policy that directly jeopardises ties with China despite having active territorial dispute in the South China Sea. Avoiding a head-on collision with China is a characteristic foreign policy style of countries of the Southeast Asian region. In the past few decades, Vietnam has also followed that pattern.

At the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, tense South China Sea situation and talks of Quad Plus meetings, etc., Xi Jinping, in his capacity as the General

Secretary of the CCP Central Committee, sent a congratulatory note to Nguyen Phu Trong

on his election as CPV chief, highlighting the need for stronger bilateral strategic communication and advancing the nations' traditional friendship...(in 2020) Xi spoke with Trong twice over the phone and he also sent a message of sympathy to Trong over the passing of Le Kha Phieu, the former general secretary of the CPV Central Committee, in August (2020) (China Daily, 2021).

Apparently, both China and Vietnam understand the compulsions of being neighbours and cannot overlook the importance of maintaining good ties despite constraints.² Amer (2014) summarises the essence of China–Vietnam ties as follows:

Vietnam's relationship with China is of paramount importance for its development and security. Although much outside attention is focused on the disputes between the two countries in the South China Sea, the relationship is much broader and multifaceted than these disputes alone. The long historical interaction between the two countries is a reference point for those who highlight long periods of collaboration as well as for those who focus on periods of China's control and attacks against Vietnam.

Amer (2014) also gives due weightage to the party-to-party links by highlighting the following:

The close cultural and political links both historically and in modern times through the leading role of the CPV and the CPC have cultivated stronger ties between the two countries. The complexities of this relationship can be formulated as follows for Vietnam: China is Vietnam's major collaborative partner, while at the same time, its major geo-strategic challenge.

Vietnam has mature relations with India, Russia and China. In dealing with difficult situations, it would continue to use the ASEAN shield, strengthened further by embracing the Indo-Pacific, and test its resilience while constantly watching from outside the progress made by the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) in dealing with China. Given Vietnam's strategic location in East Asia and a fiercely independent foreign policy, no doubt it is a leader in Southeast Asia and a pivot of East Asian power politics (Mohan, 2007). It is very well placed in the wider geopolitical dynamics, and countries such as the US, Japan and India have much to benefit from engaging Vietnam and vice versa.

Vietnam's Policy of Three Nos

One of the most profound and long-standing features of Vietnam's strategic outlook and defence policy has been its commitment to what is termed as the three Nos policy. The policy stipulates the following (Ministry of National Defence [White Paper], 2019):

1. Vietnam will never go for military alliances;
2. it will not permit a foreign military base on Vietnamese territory;
3. it will never side with one country against another.

The 2019 Defence White Paper added the fourth NO---that Vietnam will never use force or threaten to use force in international relations. By adding the fourth No, the Vietnamese government strived to highlight the peaceful and defensive nature of the Vietnam People's Army. The Ministry of National Defence (White Paper), 2019 notes the following:

Vietnam consistently advocates neither joining any military alliances, siding with one country against another, giving any other countries permission to set up military bases or use its territory to carry out military activities against other countries nor using force or threatening to use force in international relations. Vietnam also promotes defence cooperation with countries to improve its capabilities to protect the country and address common security challenges. Depending on circumstances and specific conditions, Vietnam will consider developing necessary, appropriate defence and military relations with other countries on the basis of respecting each other's independence, sovereignty, territorial unity and integrity as well as fundamental principles of international law, cooperation for mutual benefits and common interests of the region and international community.

From the above, it is quite clear that Vietnam would not like to be pushed to join 'Quad Plus' or similar such non-ASEAN military-strategic cooperation mechanism anytime soon. It would rather go bilateral in dealing with its defence, security and strategic vulnerabilities. Elevating ties with the US, Japan and India bear testimony to this. Even with regard to the China threat, which has been a matter of international attention and debate, the Vietnamese position has been to resolve it bilaterally and with the help of the ASEAN-led mechanisms. In addition to these, Vietnam has shown interest in informal arrangements and support offered by the US, Japan and India. It is widely believed that 'since the Soviet Union abandoned its alliance with Vietnam to mend ties with China in 1986, Hanoi has been consistent over decades to avoid repeating the mistake of aligning with one great power against another' (Grossman, 2020).

The following makes it clearer how carefully Vietnam wishes to handle its relationship with China. Vietnam's Defence White paper (Ministry of National Defence [White Paper], 2019) states the following:

Divergences between Vietnam and China regarding sovereignty in the East Sea are of historical existence, which need to be settled with precaution, avoiding negative impacts on general peace, friendship, and cooperation for development between the two countries. The resolution of disputes in the East Sea is a long-term, difficult and complex process, involving multiple countries and parties. The two countries should continue negotiations and consultations to find peaceful solutions on the basis of international law. While waiting for a fundamental, long-term solution to the East Sea issue, Vietnam and China need to put more effort into maintaining stability in the East Sea, complying with international law, including the 1982 UNCLOS to which both countries are signatories, seriously implementing the Declaration on the Conducts of the Parties in the South China Sea, and striving to achieve a COC between ASEAN and China.

Clearly, China occupies a critical position in Vietnam's security calculus as will be further analysed in the following section.

China: At the Core of Vietnam's Regional Security Calculations

Vietnam's relations with China are much more complicated and multilayered than they seem. On the ground, regional and geopolitical considerations, China's assertive postures and the South China Sea issue have brought about an element of challenge in the Vietnam–China equation. China and Vietnam have overlapping claims in the South China Sea. On 6 May 2009, Vietnam along with Malaysia submitted the summary of their claims and map to the United Nations Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf.

China and Vietnam have several commonalities and a strong shared history. Despite the dispute, Vietnam has maintained fully functional relations with China. In 1950, the People's Republic of China became the first country to recognise the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. The year 2020 marked 70 years of the establishment of their diplomatic ties. While China is still one of the biggest security concerns for Vietnam, it is also one of the largest trading partners. As Vietnam is turning into a destination preferred by global manufacturers, it is looking more towards China for raw materials and equipment (Khanh, 2021). Therefore, China–Vietnam relations are categorised as complex that could be manifested in Vietnam's dilemma of managing ties with China that is both an important neighbour/partner and geostrategic challenge at the same time.

The China factor has played an important role in the regional countries' scheme of things. India and Vietnam have overlapping interests and mutual concerns vis-à-vis China. Both India and Vietnam have territorial disputes with China and have been involved in a conflict with China in the past. While their respective territorial disputes are worrisome for the two countries, China's growing aggression and expansion in the Malacca Straits and Indian Ocean is a matter of bigger concern for countries that are promoting the rule-based order in the Indo-Pacific region (Mishra, 2021). Both India and Vietnam have huge economic and strategic stakes in the region. While Vietnam's direct territorial, trade and economic, and immediate-to-long-term strategic stakes are deeply embedded in the South China Sea and Malacca Straits, a rising India's economic and strategic interests span across Malacca Straits and Indian Ocean region (Pant, 2018). For one, more than half of India's maritime trade transits through the Malacca Straits. With regard to the South China Sea dispute, India has not taken sides but has supported freedom of navigation and a peaceful solution based on the United Nations' Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). India attaches (Ministry of External Affairs, 2019) the following:

...importance to freedom of navigation, overflight and unimpeded lawful commerce in the international waters in accordance with international laws, notably the UNCLOS 1982. India stands for the peaceful resolution of disputes, including through respect for legal and diplomatic processes, without resorting to the threat or use of force, and in accordance with international laws. India stands ready to work with international partners to maintain and promote peace, stability and development in the Indo-Pacific region.

Both India and Vietnam are mindful of their respective concerns and limitations. Being responsible stakeholders that believe in a rule-based Indo-Pacific order, both have strived to avoid a direct confrontation with China. Both India and Vietnam have been pitching for a peaceful ASEAN-led solution to the South China Sea dispute while also supporting the US idea of Freedom of Navigation Operations.

Role of ASEAN in Dealing with China and the South China Sea Dispute

Due to the huge power asymmetry *vis-à-vis* China, Vietnam prefers the ASEAN to take the lead in the dispute, even though China wants to negotiate with Southeast Asian claimants at the bilateral level. China became ASEAN's dialogue partner in 1996 and is today an important member of the ASEAN-led mechanisms. Also, China became the first dialogue partner to sign the *Treaty of Amity and Cooperation* with the ASEAN in 2003 and established the ASEAN–China Strategic Partnership the same year. Since the 1990s, the relations have become multifaceted under ASEAN+1 and through other ASEAN-led mechanisms.

ASEAN's emphasis on 'centrality' and 'ASEAN way' has been the driving force in dealing with the South China Sea dispute. In November 2002, ASEAN and China signed the Declaration on the Conducts of the Parties in the South China Sea. While China delayed the signing of the COC, ASEAN has been keen. On 6 August 2017, the Foreign Ministers from the ASEAN and China finally adopted the COC framework. A year later, in November 2017, the ASEAN Heads of State along with China launched the negotiations for the COC to be completed by the end of 2021 (ASEAN, 2020). Sticking to the ASEAN-led negotiation process with China indicates member states' commitment towards ASEAN centrality and the resolve to make ASEAN a robust institution. The recent issuance of the ASEAN Outlook on Indo-Pacific (AOIP) may also be seen in this context.

Relations with the US

For its defence requirements, Vietnam has been relying upon Russia and India among others. Even today, more than two-third of Vietnamese weaponry comes from Russia. It is not a coincidence that Russia,³ China and India all three countries figure in the select list of countries with which Vietnam has inked comprehensive strategic partnership agreements. This was highlighted in 2014 by the then Vietnam's Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Pham Binh Minh. Minh (2014) said as follows:

The implementation of strategic and comprehensive partnerships has followed an active and positive roadmap with a particular focus on traditional friends Russia and India, neighbours in the region (China, Japan, the Republic of Korea) and major European countries (Britain, Germany, France), and other important partners.

End of the Cold War brought about changes in the international system. Pushing aside the bitter episodes of the past, Vietnam established diplomatic ties with the

US in 1995. The two have since then realised the importance of reciprocity in their respective foreign policy priorities.

Clearly, Vietnam is weighing its options and seems to have found the US as a safe and reliable partner. One of the stated diplomatic goals of Vietnam's foreign policy has been to develop friendly relations with the major powers. It has forged partnerships with each of the members of the UN Security Council. (Mishra, 2013a, 2013b)

There are no two views that today Vietnam and the US have several shared interests and mutually overlapping concerns. Vietnam has been trying to reach out to the international stakeholders keeping in mind the possibility that it might need their support at the international forum, particularly the US. Likewise, the US is seeking new reliable partners in Southeast Asia not only to safeguard its interest but also as a potential counterweight to China (Mishra, 2013a, 2013b).

It was no coincidence that former US President Donald Trump announced America's 'Indo-Pacific dream' in Da Nang, Vietnam, during the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Summit in 2017. Speaking about a new regional construct, namely the Indo-Pacific at the APEC summit was a clear sign that the US administration would replace APEC regional construct with the Indo-Pacific. An equally important aspect of Trump's announcement was his choice of place, that is, Vietnam. Over the past few years, the US–Vietnam relations have not only taken a quantum jump in the overall nature of relationship but the military strategic component of their bilateral relationship has also transformed qualitatively. Trump administration took several key steps that made Indo-Pacific a key feature of the US foreign policy. Joe Biden, who has recently taken charge of the American Presidency, has already expressed his commitment to the Indo-Pacific vision, thereby clearly highlighting a continuity in the American foreign policy approach.

However, it is also true that some key differences still exist between the US and Vietnam, which prick Vietnam. For instance, concerns have been raised in the past about the human rights situation and the lack of a democratic system in Vietnam, which has put its leaders in awkward positions. During Trump's term, these issues did not figure much in dialogues, but the possibility of their coming up during the Democrat-ruled Biden administration is likely.

During the Trump presidency, Vietnam hosted the Trump–Kim Jong Un summit, which certainly is an example of growing trust in the US–Vietnam ties. Vietnam also benefited massively because of diversions in global supply chains as a result of Trump's trade war on China. It has also been reported that Chinese companies have shifted base to Vietnam in order to deflect the aggressive US posture vis-à-vis trade concerns with China. And yet, the 'Trump administration labelled Vietnam a currency manipulator (in 2020), raising the possibility of US tariffs on Vietnamese goods. The trade gap widened to \$63 billion in 2020 from \$47 billion in 2019' (Khanh, 2021). The US Trade Representative reiterated it in January 2021. He stated, 'Vietnam's actions to push down the value of its currency were 'unreasonable' and restricted US commerce', but he 'did not take immediate action to impose punitive tariffs—leaving the decision in the hands of Biden administration' (Khanh, 2021). In essence, the Vietnam–US relations are still not perfectly stable, and there are several issues that might crop up between them and

create undesirable scenarios. An informed assessment of Vietnam's security perception and priorities must count this aspect in.

The Growing Significance of Japan

In this context, Vietnam's steadily developing ties with Japan is an important step. Both India and Vietnam are comfortable working with Japan. During Shinzo Abe's term as Prime Minister, Japan's relations with Vietnam made a quantum leap. Abe's successor and current Prime Minister Suga Yoshihide chose Vietnam and Indonesia as destinations for his first official visit in October 2020, which underscores the importance Japan is attaching to Vietnam—not just in terms of trade, investment and labour linkages but also in terms of defence and strategic ties.

During his visit, Suga emphasised the importance of Indo-Pacific. He stated, 'Vietnam is crucial to achieving our vision of "the Free and Open Indo-Pacific", and our valuable partner' (*Economic Times*, 2020a). He even hinted at China's growing aggression in the South China Sea, 'Unfortunately in this region, there is a move in the South China Sea that goes against the rule of law and openness stated in this ASEAN Outlook, and Japan strongly opposes any attempt that escalates tensions in the South China Sea' (Dinh & Yamaguchi, 2020). Shinzo Abe was one of the strongest pioneers of the Indo-Pacific, and Suga's focus on the Indo-Pacific in Vietnam indicates the importance of the Southeast Asian nation in Japan's regional security calculations. Japan and Vietnam elevated the level of their relations to the 'Extensive Strategic Partnership for Peace and Prosperity in Asia' in 2014 when Vietnamese President Truong Tan Sang visited Japan (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2021).

Japan's active promotion of the Indo-Pacific and Partnership for Quality Infrastructure (PQI) offer new possibilities to Vietnam. As India and Japan are exploring opportunities to invest in a third country using the Asia–Africa Growth Corridor platform, Vietnam could serve as a great investment destination and benefit from it.

Recent Developments in the Regional Security Dynamics: The Indo-Pacific Construct

India officially outlined its approach towards the Indo-Pacific with Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Shangri La speech on 1 June 2018. India's Indo-Pacific approach encompasses its aspirations to make the Indo-Pacific order 'free, open and inclusive'—an order that is based on 'respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity' of countries of the region irrespective of their power or size (Ministry of External Affairs, 2020a).

The salience of peacefully resolving the disputes in accordance with international laws cannot be overstated in India's Indo-Pacific articulation. The brief by the Indo-Pacific Division of India's Ministry of External Affairs (2020a)

also ‘respects the right to freedom of navigation and overflight for all in the international seas’, which bears a reference to the South China Sea and China’s bullying behaviour to stop the joint oil exploration activities being undertaken by India and Japan. To allay the fears of its friends and partners from the ASEAN region, Modi clarified that India is not interested in forming an exclusive club of countries to single out one country of the region. He further highlighted that ‘ASEAN Centrality’ is at core of India’s Indo-Pacific approach. Modi’s clear articulation of the Indo-Pacific approach and his careful omission of the Quad found resonance across capitals in Southeast Asia. Japan too came up with similar clarifications stating that the Indo-Pacific is inclusive and is not in alignment with the four-membered Quad. These positive developments coupled with enthusiasm of some of the ASEAN members such as Indonesia and Vietnam eventually led ASEAN to declare its own approach towards the Indo-Pacific. Indeed, that was a watershed moment in setting the strategic contours of the region based on the requirements of the changing regional scenario.

India was the first country to place ASEAN centrality in its approach towards the Indo-Pacific. Vietnam is an important partner in the region for India. During the 2020 India–Vietnam virtual summit, Modi called Vietnam ‘a key pillar of India’s Act East policy and a vital partner in its Indo-Pacific Vision’ (*Economic Times*, 2020b). While China has been a cause of concern for several countries embracing the Indo-Pacific, it is not the main factor behind countries’ participation. By placing the ASEAN at the core of its Indo-Pacific policy, India made it amply clear that its Act East Policy is aligned with its Indo-Pacific vision.

ASEAN is the first and until now the only multilateral institution to launch an Indo-Pacific vision. This came after countries such as India and Japan placed ASEAN at the centre of their Indo-Pacific strategies. To clarify its own stand and prevent the region from turning into a geopolitical theatre amid the US–China rivalry, ASEAN launched its own AOIP. Like several of its fellow ASEAN members, Vietnam too supports and endorses the Indo-Pacific construct. Vietnam’s approach on Indo-Pacific is in sync with the AOIP. However, it is unlikely that Vietnam will follow the Indonesian path and chart its own independent path in supporting, endorsing and promoting the Indo-Pacific construct. That Vietnam’s approach towards the Indo-Pacific is strongly anchored to its ASEAN association is clearly demonstrated from the following statement from the Defence White Paper (Ministry of National Defence [White Paper], 2019):

Vietnam is ready to participate in security and defence cooperation mechanisms suitable to its capabilities and interests, including security and defence mechanisms in the Indo-Pacific region as well as those of the European Union and the United Nations. Vietnam advocates expanding cooperation between ASEAN with external partners within the ASEAN-led multilateral security mechanisms on the basis of respecting fundamental principles, standards and norms of ASEAN.

Indo-Pacific has been figuring in India–Vietnam official documents as well. For instance, the 2018 Joint statement issued during the visit of Indian President Ram Nath Kovind, stated (Ministry of External Affairs, 2018):

The two sides reiterated the importance of the building of a peaceful and prosperous Asia and the Indo-Pacific region, on the basis of respect for national sovereignty and international law as well as freedom of navigation, overflight and unimpeded economic activities.

Vietnam prefers ASEAN to take the lead in the Indo-Pacific, but at the same time, it is cultivating bilateral ties with countries propagating the Indo-Pacific construct especially the Quad member countries. However, this does not imply that Vietnam is keen on being a part of the Quad plus, as will be discussed later.

Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI)

The IPOI was launched by PM Modi in Bangkok on 4 November 2019. Modi chose the EAS as the occasion to launch the IPOI which is an ‘open for all initiative’ based on seven pillars, namely: Capacity Building and Resource Sharing; Disaster Risk Reduction and Management; Maritime Ecology; Maritime Resources; Maritime Security; Science, Technology and Academic Cooperation; and Trade Connectivity and Maritime Transport (Ministry of External Affairs, 2020a).

Vietnam is well integrated into India’s IPOI. India’s transnational infrastructure connectivity projects have Vietnam as a key member. The India–Myanmar–Thailand trilateral highway, for instance, aims to eventually link with Cambodia and Vietnam via road networks. In other key sectors also, Vietnam has been given considerable importance—whether it is capability building or resource sharing, maritime transport or disaster risk management, India and Vietnam have made considerable strides. With Australia agreeing to coordinate maritime ecology segment and Japan doing the same on the connectivity front, it is clear that India’s IPOI initiative will get the assistance and support of its major Indo-Pacific partners. Among the ASEAN member countries, both Vietnam and the Philippines have agreed to work closely with India under the framework of IPOI. The other key multilateral and minilateral initiatives such as Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR), Supply Chain Resilience Initiative, Blue Dot Network and Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure have opened up new vistas of cooperation between India and Vietnam.

Assessing India–Vietnam Ties: Current State and Future Directions

Vietnam lies at the centre of India’s Act East policy, which is not only in continuity with its Look East policy but also with the decades-old tradition of robust strategic and defence ties with Vietnam. For one, India and Vietnam signed the strategic partnership agreement on 6 July 2007, which was one of the first strategic partnerships India had signed in the Southeast Asian region. Over the past six years of Act East policy, several key developments have taken place in terms of strengthening the India–Vietnam ties. An important development in that regard took place during September 2016 Vietnam visit of Modi. During his visit, Modi termed Vietnam as an ‘important pillar of Act East policy’ (Ministry of External

Affairs, 2016) and the two sides agreed to build a 'Plan of Action to bring the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership to reality in all areas of cooperation' (Ministry of External Affairs, 2016).

On the defence cooperation front, Modi not only reiterated India's commitment to provide the necessary assistance in developing Vietnam's defence capabilities but also announced a new Line of Credit facility in defence for Vietnam. During his visit, it was agreed that M/s Larsen & Toubro, in collaboration with Vietnam Border Guards, will supply Offshore High-speed Patrol Boats worth US\$100 million Line of Credit extended by India to Vietnam (Ministry of External Affairs, 2016). India also pledged a US\$5 million grant to construct an Army Software Park at the Telecommunications University in Nha Trang (Ministry of External Affairs, 2016). Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on cyber security was another important item in the list of agreements signed during Modi's Vietnam visit. It is worth mentioning here that the *Joint Vision Statement on India–Vietnam Defence Relations*, agreed in May 2015 and aimed to implement the agenda items between 2015 and 2020, has made significant progress.

India's Logistical Support to Vietnam's Defence Sector

The first major defence cooperation agreement between India and Vietnam was signed in September 1994. As both India and Vietnam were dependent on the Soviet for inventories, the 1994 agreement facilitated India to service Vietnam aircraft (Chakravorty, 2019).

Subsequently, the comprehensive defence cooperation began with the signing of a formal defence protocol in 2000 (Mishra, 2014). The agreement paved the path for Vietnam to procure military helicopters and equipment for repair of Vietnamese aircraft and facilitated the training of Vietnam's military personnel by India (Pant, 2018). The protocol included the sale of military helicopters, equipment for the repair of Vietnam's MiG-21 aircraft and training programmes for Vietnam's military personnel and pilots. Since then, the two countries have been sharing a common prism on strategic matters such as defence and maritime security across the Bay of Bengal and the Andaman Sea, manifested through cooperation at multifarious levels (Mishra, 2013b).

Vietnam has been one of the earliest and biggest beneficiaries of India's defence support on the logistics front. Implementation of the US\$100 million Line of Credit for the building of high-speed patrol vessels for the Vietnamese Border Guards is one of the latest examples in that regard. The Vietnamese side appreciated India's offer of the US\$500 million Line of Credit to defence industry and agreed to accelerate procedures for its approval. Among all the ASEAN countries, defence cooperation with Vietnam is at a very high level. Vietnam is one of the few countries with which India has the Comprehensive Strategic partnership agreement.

During the India–Vietnam virtual summit on 21 December 2020 between Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc, Modi stated (Prime Minister's Office, 2020),

Enhanced defence and security partnership between India and Vietnam will be an important factor of stability in the Indo-Pacific region. To this end, the two sides will step up their military-to-military exchanges, training and capacity building programmes across the three services and coast guards and will intensify their defence industry collaboration building on India's defence credit lines extended to Vietnam. They will further institutionalise defence exchanges through mutual logistics support, regular ship visits, joint exercises, exchanges in military science and technology, information sharing.

The statement covered all aspects of defence and security relations and indicated towards a thrust in the relations. The two countries are friendly towards each other explaining the overt defence dimension in bilateral relations. Common goals, similar approaches, alignment of interests and shared interests bind India and Vietnam closer. Defence cooperation now includes traditional military cooperation, intelligence sharing, port calls, military personnel training, capacity building, Line of Credit for defence procurement, etc. Both countries established Strategic Partnership in 2007 during the visit of then Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung to India. It was agreed that India would train the Vietnam People's Air Force personnel in flying the SU-30. India also agreed to help with submarine crew training, in addition to counter-insurgency, jungle warfare and all domains of armed forces training, etc. (Chakravorty, 2019).

The two countries interact at different levels and have several mechanisms to engage each other at different levels. Joint Commission Meeting at the Foreign Ministers' level and the Foreign Office Consultations and Strategic Dialogue at secretary level are cases in point and include discussions on a wide range of issues.

In May 2015, a Joint Vision Statement on Defence Cooperation for the period 2015–2020 was signed during the visit of Vietnamese Minister for National Defence General Phung Quang Thanh to India. Both sides decided to further increase the intensity of interactions and facilitate *cooperation in the development of new technologies thereafter*. One of the important outcomes was also an MoU on cooperation between the Coast Guards. Dialogues at military levels are also on going between India and Vietnam. The inaugural Army to Army Staff Talks were held in New Delhi in July 2017. In May 2016, the Indian Navy and the Vietnam People's Navy commenced the annual staff talks. The second round of talks was held in New Delhi in December 2017.

In terms of defence exports, India's 'Vietnam model', that is, providing lines of credit for defence acquisitions, is registering success with Philippines showing interest in procuring Brahmos from India. Such an initiative would be 'a win-win situation enabling the Philippines to diversify defence-supply sources while contributing to the success of Modi's "Make in India" campaign' (Mishra, 2019). It is interesting to note here that in August 2017 itself, Vietnam hinted that it had procured the Brahmos cruise missiles. This was clearly manifested in a response given by Vietnam's Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson during a press conference held on 1 September 2017. In response to a question on Vietnam procuring Brahmos, it was stated, '[i]t should be emphasised that Vietnam persistently pursues a national defence policy of peace and of self-defence. Procurement of defence equipment by Vietnam is consistent

with the policy of peace and self-defence and is the normal practice in the national defence' (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2017). India, however, termed such reports incorrect (*Economic Times*, 2018) even though contradictory signals were given earlier in 2016 (USNI, 2016).

Nevertheless, according to recent news reports, India and Russia have decided to sell Brahmos to the Philippines. According to the reports, the 'second country on the list is Indonesia, while Vietnam, UAE, Saudi Arabia and South Africa have also shown interest in Brahmos' (*Times of India*, 2021). It has also been reported that nine countries have also shown interest in procuring the indigenously developed Akash missile system. In addition to Vietnam, Indonesia and the Philippines, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Algeria and Kenya are also interested in procuring India's Akash missiles (*Times of India*, 2021).

Quad, Quad Plus and Vietnam's Strategic Choices

The idea of a Quad was propounded by Shinzo Abe in August 2007 as an 'Asian arc of democracy' a cohort of sort of like-minded countries involving India, Japan, Australia and the US. The four-nation joint military exercise—Malabar—conducted around the same time rung alarm bells in China. Beijing issued *démarche* to the representatives of these countries, terming the Quad, an anti-China coalition. Fearing backlash from China, on which its economy was heavily dependent, Australia withdrew from the Quad in February 2008, pushing it to a dormant state. A decade later, during the ASEAN Summit in November 2017, Quad was revived. Between 2017 and 2021, several meetings at the senior official level and Foreign Ministers' level have taken place. Three ministerial meetings have taken place so far. The first-ever summit level Quad meeting was also held virtually on 12 March 2021. Highlighting India's approach to the Quad, India's Minister of External Affairs S. Jaishankar stated in his opening remarks at the second Quad Ministerial Meeting in Tokyo, Japan (Ministry of External Affairs, 2020b):

...as vibrant and pluralistic democracies with shared values, our nations have collectively affirmed the importance of maintaining a free, open and inclusive Indo-Pacific. We remain committed to upholding the rules-based international order, underpinned by the rule of law, transparency, freedom of navigation in the international seas, respect for territorial integrity and sovereignty and peaceful resolution of disputes.

The second Quad meeting is considered significant on several counts. Several interesting pledges were made by the leaders of four member countries accompanied by interesting slogans as well. For instance, during the meeting, the then US Deputy Secretary of State Stephen Biegun called for a 'NATO-like alliance' with the three Quad partners. In response, the Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi termed it a part of Washington's effort to build an 'Indo-Pacific NATO'. Interestingly, Wang Yi's statement came out in complete contrast with his own earlier statement about the Quad where he had termed it just an 'Oceanic foam'. Recent developments regarding institutionalisation of the Quad have, of course,

made China wary of the concerted efforts made by the four democratic powers. Interestingly, Mike Pompeo, former US Secretary of State, attempted to bring in an ideological dimension in this dynamic by stating that the CCP has been exploiting its own people and other countries alike to ensure its survival.

This subtle differentiation between China—the nation—and the CCP is something that Pompeo repeated in several of his speeches during his visit to some of the Asian countries. However, this again does not gel too well with the sensitivities of Vietnam and several other Southeast and East Asian countries. Democracy has been a perennially sensitive subject for the Southeast and East Asian region, and some of the countries of the region find it particularly difficult to deal with the US on the matter. Terming Quad a coalition of democracies and expecting a socialist country such as Vietnam to become a part of such a diplomatic–strategic campaign overlooks Vietnam’s history and politics to say the least.

The ‘Quad Plus’

The idea of a Quad Plus mechanism has been an issue for discussion among think-tanks and policymakers in the four Quad countries. Over time, different permutations and combinations have also been proposed and deliberated upon. The list not only includes Vietnam but also South Korea and New Zealand, and according to some even Indonesia at some stage. There have also been talks of including Britain and France in the Quad. It was Tarō Kōno, the Japanese foreign minister who officially suggested that Britain and France could be involved in the Quad ministerial and senior official consultations. Boris Johnson, the UK Prime Minister, has even come up with the idea of ‘Transatlantic Quad’.

Vietnam’s ‘Quad’ Hesitation

Several scholars have argued that the Quad should and would eventually include Vietnam as a part of the ‘Quad Plus’ mechanism. However, such an assumption does not sufficiently capture Vietnam’s strategic signals. Quad partnership among the US, Japan, Australia and India is still taking shape, and it has to meet some more criteria before it can define the contours of military cooperation among the original Quad members especially in case of an eventuality. Unless it acquires the role of a swift and committed security provider platform, it would be naïve to expect the so-called Quad Plus countries to join the platform. Unlike South Korea, Vietnam is not in a security treaty with the US or its allies. In other words, Vietnam is not an alliance partner of the US. Like India, it not only has a still-evolving non-alliance relationship with the US but it is also close to Russia and depends on Moscow for majority of its defence supplies. In a situation where Vietnam’s ties get worse with China coupled with the US getting closer, Russia would naturally side with China posing another policy dilemma for Vietnam. These are constraints that Vietnam has to think about before it joins the Quad plus bandwagon.

The Way Forward

The Quad members including India are busy consolidating mechanisms to institutionalise it and make it swift and effective to deal with any challenge its members might face in times to come. Once Quad has proved its efficacy, it should move forward to include new members. India should be particularly careful with including Vietnam at this stage as such a step might derail the benefits that both India and Vietnam accrue from Russia among other things. Also, even in the worst-case scenario, Vietnam would not like to anger China unless it has reliable partners and credible deterrence capabilities. Pham Sanh Chau, the Vietnamese Ambassador to India, echoed this in his press statement in 2018. The statement's significance lies in the fact that it came out just before the November 2018 visit of Ram Nath Kovind, the President of India. Responding to a question on whether Vietnam would join Quad, Ambassador Pham said, 'we don't want any military alliance as it is not conducive to regional security' (*Times of India*, 2018). He further added that Vietnam 'welcome(s) any initiative which can attribute to peace in the region but if there's any ganging up or use of force, it will go against Vietnam's position'. However, though far-fetched, a qualitative change in Chinese threat might push Vietnam to join the Quad (Plus) mechanism as has been the case with India. Quang Dy (2020) argues,

While Vietnamese leaders remain reluctant to go along with the Quad-plus concept, Chinese assertiveness in the South China Sea may force their hand. As envisaged in the contingency clause of the Defence White Paper, Hanoi is expected to join the Quad in measured steps to avoid unnecessarily antagonising its more powerful neighbour.

Clearly, the acceptability of Quad Plus or any Quad-related platform is directly proportional to the level of threat China poses to the ASEAN member countries.

In summation, it may be argued that based on its perceptions of regional security dynamics, Vietnam would continue to pursue its policy of basing its strategic relations on bilateral foundations while moving cautiously in forging multilateral arrangements that are not directed against a particular state. In doing so, Vietnam would continue to sync its strategic and diplomatic moves with the fellow member countries of the ASEAN. More importantly, considering the fluid strategic dynamics and uncertain nature of major stakeholders in the region, Vietnam would continue to engage as many major stakeholders as possible. In this context, India has an important role to play in the region as also in Vietnam's security and strategic stratagem and act as a stabiliser reinforcing Vietnam's commitment to contribute to an open, peaceful, rules-based and inclusive Indo-Pacific order. As one of India's reliable partners in the Southeast Asian region, Vietnam prefers India to play an instrumental role in shaping the security dynamics of the region. The emerging Indo-Pacific order, which positions India as a key stakeholder, provides new vistas of cooperation to India and Vietnam in meeting their foreign policy goals.

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Notes

1. For a detailed analysis of India's engagement with the Southeast Asian region since antiquity, see Muni and Mishra (2019).
2. That said, seemingly, the party-to-party linkages are not as strong as they were in previous decades. Arguably, within the CPV, a pro-US group is fast emerging that wants to stay out of China's shadows.
3. Due to paucity of space, it is not possible to mention the role of Russia and the European powers in great details in this paper. The focus of this article is on leading proponents of Indo-Pacific region.

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