



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vietnam in India's Defense Cooperation Policy In The Face Of Growing Competition from China

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Over the past years, owing to the challenges of regional security context, particularly the China's unreasonable and unruly claim on Vietnam sea territory, it is of great significance to establish a regular modern national defense focusing on building up a navy and air force with adequate capability to protect national sovereignty and territorial integrity. Strengthening security – defense cooperation with credible and potential countries like India is a crucial and pressing mission of Vietnam. Studying the security-defense cooperation relation and assessing the probability of Vietnam – India cooperation hold such practical and scientific values. The article provides an insight of influential factors and analyzes Vietnam – India defense cooperation relation in fields of: air force, navy,... and assess the probability of cooperation, give recommendations to both governments for better understanding of significance of Vietnam – India defense cooperation as well as make implications for future Vietnam - India relation.

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1. INTRODUCTION

As proved by more than 47 years of establishing and developing the diplomatic tie (1972 - 2020), the long traditional and friendly relation between Vietnam and India has recorded tremendous achievements; in its "Look East policy", India deliberately considers Vietnam one of the most important partners. The current global and regional context thrust India and Vietnam to regularly consult with each other and share views on many important issues. Hence, the two countries have a long-term strategic stance based on the vision for peace and prosperity for the Indo-Pacific region. The bilateral relations have been comprehensively developing in various fields: politics, economy, culture – society, national defense, especially articulating the desire to further tighten the defense and security partnerships as well as fostering collaboration on emerging fields such as information and communication technology, renewable energy, innovation... on the basis of the great potential as being two dynamically developing economies, among the fastest in the world. Both are willing to proactively cooperate through the Indo-Pacific Vision. Over the past years, changes in regional and global situation along with the demand of protecting national sovereignty and territorial integrity, especially with the emergence of China, are the catalyst fuelling Vietnam – India further development in practical and intimate cooperation relation.

2. CHINA'S EMERGENCE

(i) Over the past decade, the correlation of synergy and role of major countries in Asia has witnessed several changes. In 2010, China altered Japan's position as the second global biggest economy, which

laid a solid foundation for its annually-increasing nation defense budget with double digits (in 2019 increased by 7.5% compared to 2018, reaching 177 billion USD) (VOA Vietnam: 17/07/2019). China, blatantly, further elevates its military modernization by conducting testing programs and putting into practice a series of modern weapon systems including Liaoning aircraft carrier, domestic aircraft carrier coded Type-001A, manufacturing Mark-V fighter aircrafts J20 and J31, modern Type-095-class nuclear submarines, purchasing S-400 advanced air defense missile systems developed by Russia and Su-35 multi-functional fighters aircrafts, etc.

China's powerful military potential facilitates its rough aggressive actions on territory dispute with neighbor states, which aggravates "the theory of China threat causing insecurity, international arms race..." (Nguyen Xuan Thang 2013: 23-24). Vietnam and India are countries strongly influenced with long-lasting territory disputes; hence, China's sharpening emergence is such an "invisible glue" tightening the two countries' defense cooperation.

(ii) In the past years, China has constantly laid claim and conducted contradictory actions on maritime sovereignty in the South China Sea such as: making unreasonable "nine-dash line" claims, sending the huge oil rig HD - 981 into EEZ region of Vietnam (May 2014), unilaterally enacting a ban on fishing in the South China Sea, simultaneously disregarding the ruling of the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) rejecting China's "nine-dash line" as well as unlawfully building-up and expanding islands belonging to Spratly and Paracel islands of Vietnam in order to change the status quo to monopolize the South China Sea... Those drastic actions have violated international laws and caused regional security disorder in Southeast Asia, especially seriously threatened Vietnam's sovereignty and territorial integrity. In such this context, Vietnam has been calling for international support, including India. Despite having no dispute in this area, India still sustain political-security and economic interests in the South China Sea area claimed by Vietnam (Trinh Thi Hoa 2017: 425).

(iii) China's rise has threatened India's strategic security space seen from three angles: on land, in the Indian Ocean and in the South China Sea.

- On land, China established an association of counter-terrorism with 3 Central South countries: Pakistan, Afghanistan and Tajikistan on August 3rd 2016, substantially allowed its air force and infantry to approach India border (Truong Minh Huy Vu 2016: 367-368). Additionally, Chinese military intrusions in the Himalayan border area, especially Giamu and Kashmir, as well China's sovereignty claims over the Arunachal Pradesh region, tensions between the two sides on the Doklam Plateau in 2017, clashes and confrontations at spots along the Line of Actual Control between the two countries (LAC) such as Pangong Lake in Ladakh, Nathu La Pass in Sikkim, Galwan Valley in May and June 2020... the China's security-defense backing for Pakistan has always posed a permanent sense of insecurity for India.
- In India Ocean, China has been boosting its influence on this area, which is considered India's traditional influential zone, through such port and harbor projects such as: Hambantota, Colombo (Sri Lanka), Sittwe (Myanmar), Chittagong, Mongla and Payra (Bangladesh), Gwadar, Karachi (Pakistan),... (TTXVN: 16) Those are moves made by China to establish a "string of pearls", creating a "siege position" towards India in the Indian Ocean.
- In case of occurring India - China military dispute, both India land and sea will be beset by the grip of the ground forces, air force and navy basing in the Sino-Indian border, from the border of Central-Southern Asian Counter-Terrorism Cooperation, Pakistan, and the "string of pearls" in the Indian Ocean.

In South China Sea, India view on this area importance derives from 2 space dimensions:

(i) *Geospatially*, South China Sea is a maritime connecting point between Pacific and Indian Ocean as well as important trade route between India and Southeast Asian countries. About 92 - 95% of Indian trade goods pass Indian Ocean, in which 55% of them are shipped through Malacca strait to Southeast Asia, East Asia, USA and Canada markets. India's trade in the South China Sea is further enhancing since this nation and ASEAN aim to raise bilateral trade turnover to the desired goal of US \$200 billion by 2025 via the implementation of Free Trade Agreements on goods, services and investment between the two sides. The linkage of economic and trade relations between India and the Pacific has seen an increasingly intimate and interdependent development. Due to the elevating trade values

between India and Asia-Pacific countries, ensuring the safety of transport routes through the South China Sea plays an important role for stability and sustainable growth of the Indian economy.

(ii) Geopolitically, it can be said that South China Sea is the buffer zone for India to further its reach to Asia – Pacific area in the “Look East policy”. Traditional and non-traditional security challenges such as escalating conflicts between sovereignty claimants, sea-based transnational crimes in the region will hinder India's maritime shipping routes. Furthermore, the South China Sea and the Strait of Malacca are the shortest routes connecting the Indian Ocean and Pacific Ocean. Therefore, India is about to spur its political engagement and navy presence in the South China Sea to monitor the activities of navies of US, Japan, Russia and especially China... It is possibly stated that the East Sea has become “an integral part of India's security belt”, acting as a strategic bridge between the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean, concurrently a region holding strategic interests for India in terms of politics - security and economy. India's military presence allows it to seek a foothold in the region on par with its rising power status, expand the strategic security space and create a balance of influence with China (Nguyen Ngoc Ha 2017: 427).

Dealing with changes in regional and international situation, security press from China in parallel with common genuine security interests in South China Sea and Indian Ocean are one of significant factors promoting Vietnam – India security - defense cooperation, make these countries become “inevitable partners”.

3. VIETNAM – INDIA DEFENSE COOPERATION STATUS

3.1. Promoting activities by national leaders

Vietnam-India defense cooperation was established by the Indian opening of the Military Attaché's Office in Hanoi (1980) and Vietnam opening of the Military Attaché's Office in New Delhi (1985). In 2000, the Indian Minister of Defense signed a Protocol on defense cooperation with Vietnam with the following contents: establishing a dialogue mechanism between the two defense ministries, sharing strategic intelligence, and navy drill between the two countries and patrol coordination between Vietnam Coast Guard and Indian Coast Guard,... (Son Nguyệt 2017: 65)

The next vital milestone in defense cooperation between the two countries is the Joint Declaration on strategic partners in five key areas: politics, security - defense, economic cooperation and trade, science and technology, culture and technology, regional and multilateral cooperation, which were signed on the occasion of official visit paid by Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung in 2007; since then, Vietnam – India relation was upgraded to strategic partnership (baochinhphu: 27.10.2014).

In November 2009, Vietnam's Defense Minister Phung Quang Thang had a high-ranking dialogue with his Indian peer A.K.Antoni. The meeting was marked by the two-side approval of a “Memorandum of Understanding on Defense cooperation and exchange” with contents including delegation exchange, experience sharing between arms, training support for Vietnamese officers and cadres in order to cooperation promotion.

Within the official visit to Vietnam in October 2010, Indian Defense Minister A.K. Antony and General Phung Quang Thanh agreed on defense cooperative measures such as: delegation exchange, common training on combat operations in mountainous areas, repair and maintenance of naval ships, and coordination in search and rescue activities... India agreed with Vietnam to train peacekeeping forces, establish a foreign language center and exchange naval and air force information for two sides. Whereas, Vietnam offered to provide facilities for repair, maintenance and refueling of Indian Navy ships at Cam Ranh port (soha: 12.12.2017).

In July 2011, Admiral Nguyen Van Hien - Commander of the Vietnamese Navy paid a visit to India to request New Delhi's assistance in the manufacture of offshore patrol boats and high-speed attack ships. Within the framework of this official visit, India counterpart reaffirmed their consistent support which contains 2 contents: continuing training naval forces and assist Vietnam to maintain the equipment purchased from Russia. In the following visit took place in September 2011, Indian Deputy Defense Minister Shashi Kant Sharma attended the annual Strategic Dialogue held in Hanoi, the two sides discussed measures to promote cooperation between the military forces: Navy, Air Force, Ground Force and defense industries. Deputy Minister Shashi Kant Sharma proposed to

provide infrastructure for naval force training and support to improve naval capacity for the Vietnam (soha: December 12, 2017).

In his working visit to India in October 2011, President Truong Tan Sang requested India's support in 4 areas: training of submariners and pilots to control Su-30 fighters, modernization of Nha Trang military port, and medium-sized warships transferring (baodatviet: 10.10.2011). Hanoi also asked New Delhi to consider supplying BrahMos supersonic missiles to Vietnam, while Indian defense officials reaffirmed that New Delhi would continue to support Vietnam in military training, human resources development and intelligence sharing.

The official visit to India by Secretary General of the Communist Party of Vietnam Nguyen Phu Trong in November 2013 made far-reach changes in Vietnam - India defense cooperation. The two top leaders strongly recommended regular defense dialogues such as training, drills, Navy ships and Coast Guard visiting... (vietnamplus: November 21, 2013), and urging the two sides to continue discussing the terms of the \$ 100 million credit in defense area. Both sides complimented on the signing of the "Agreement on Mutual Protection for Confidential Information Exchange" and the on-going "The MOU on the training of Vietnamese naval and air force officers".

During the official visit to India on 23th – 26th May 2015 lead by General Phung Quang Thang – Minister of Defense in order to exchange viewpoints on regional and international security issues of each nation, the "Joint Declaration on Vietnam – India defense relation" was signed by both sides. (TTXVN: 24.05.2015).

On 5th – 8th June 2016, Indian Defense Minister Manohar Parrikar paid his official visit to Vietnam. The two sides reviewed regional and international security situation, collaboration achievements as well as considered defense cooperation the main aspect in Vietnam – India strategic partnership, which focuses on the training for officers of navy, air force, information communication, defense industry and peacekeeping... [tuoitrenews: 16.06.2016]. In return, General Ngo Xuan Lich, Vietnam Minister of Defense lead his ministerial delegation to India with a view to further promoting defense cooperation closely and effectively (Rajaram Panda 2017: 47).

September 2016 marked the official visit of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi to Vietnam in which top leaders of both sides agreed on the bilateral-relation upgradation to "comprehensive strategic partnership". Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced to provide Vietnam with a credit package worth 500 million USD to strengthen defense cooperation between the two countries. (ndtv.com: 03.09.2016). This was such an intense move to support Vietnam in enhancing its military power, also facilitated further weapon-providing contracts from India in the following time.

In March 2018, Vietnam's President Tran Dai Quang paid an official visit to India, the joint statement between the two countries top leaders clearly defined some contents such as: both sides agreed that security and defense cooperation stands as an important and effective backbone of the "comprehensive strategic partnership" and expressed satisfaction with the results attained in this area. The two sides appraised the exchange of high-level delegations on security and defense, agreed on maintaining the current dialogue mechanisms, strengthening cooperation between military branches and arms, as well as promoting cooperation in the fields of cybersecurity and counter-terrorism and extremism in any forms, transnational crime, human trafficking, drug smuggling and maritime security, climate change and food security (baochinhphu.vn).

In November 2018, Indian President Ram Nath Kovind, in his working visit to Vietnam, discuss the affairs of bilateral relations. The topic of India's 100 million USD credit package for Vietnam to build high-class patrol boats was also tabled in the discussion on maritime security. President Ram Nath Kovind also claimed that Vietnam is a key element of India's "Look East Policy" and "the two countries share a joint vision of the Indo-Pacific region, of which the South China Sea is a pivotal component," reiterating New Delhi's commitment to strengthen bilateral security and defense cooperation.

In August 2018, Deputy Defense Minister Nguyen Chi Vinh visited India and held talks with his Indian counterparts. In the Dialogue of Defense Policy, the two sides shared strategic assessments of the international and regional situation related to national security and defense of each country, as well as proposed guidelines for cooperation between the Ministry of Defense of two nations, contributing

to promoting peace, stability and international maritime freedom. The two Deputy Ministers of Defense also committed to further strengthen relations between military branches and arms: Navy, Air Force, Defense Industry, training and coaching (including English training for Vietnamese military officers).

In addition to the visits of senior leaders of the two countries, the Ministry of National Defense conducted periodical Deputy Ministerial-level Defense Dialogue. During the period 2003 - 2009, 4 dialogue sessions were organized and tremendous goals have been attained by both sides (2003, 2006, 2007 and 2008) (Udai Bhanu Singh 2017: 378). On the basis of the significant prior achievements, since 2010 up to now, those dialogues have been conducted annually, alternately in each country.

It can be said that, relatively-regular visits paid by two countries' high-ranking leaders and defense ministry have contributed to strengthen friendly relations, mutual understanding and trust between the two governments, armed force and people, simultaneously boosted bilateral defense cooperation.

3.2. Defense cooperation status

Base on the strategic plan of military leaders of the two countries and requirements of modern warfare mainly focusing on engagement of air and naval forces. Defense cooperation between the two sides has been implemented mainly in two air and navy arms:

3.2.1. Airforce cooperation

India has supported Vietnam in MiG-21 fighter upgradation. Accordingly, the upgrading package consists of: equipping with Doppler pulse radar, upgrading electronic system, radar warning sensor (RWR) developed by India's DRDO, new-generation computers, new-generation short-range radios operating in the VF, VHF, UHF bands, IR-based target detection system from Russia, cockpit equipped with two Sextan MFD-55 LCD monitors, one-piece windshield, HUD display ... (tinbiendong: 12.10.2016). The upgraded fighters MiG 21- Bison hold better performance with extendable service time within the context in which Vietnam is currently unaffordable to purchase more modern fighters. On December 12th 2014, in his speech to the Parliament, Indian Defense Minister Manohar Parrikar stated that India government officially approved the training for Vietnam pilots for Su-30 fighter control and this project is under progress of implementation **(thehindu: 06.12.2016), this program is being implemented according to the predetermined roadmap, making an effective contribution to upgrading and completing the level of Su-30 fighter pilots for Vietnam.**

3.2.2. Navy cooperation

India committed training for 500 Vietnamese submarine-control officers at INS Satavahana Submarine Officer School in Visakhapatnam City, Andhra Pradesh state. (news: 09.09.2014). The first course was marked by 54 Vietnamese graduates in 2013. Currently, the second submariner course is being conducted with 19 Vietnamese officers and 42 mariners. With the experience of using 10 Russian-made Kilo-class submarines in the mid-1980s, India is eligible to transfer experience of handling practical issues to Vietnamese officers in order to save time for efficiently accessing and operating Kilo-class submarine. Unlike the deep-sea terrain and icy-underneath climate in Russia, the superiority of being trained in India will help Vietnamese officers to practice on Kilo-class submarines in shallow water with the conditions of the topography and seabed weather similar to those of South China Sea.

On July 2, 2014, Economic Times (ET) reported that India and Vietnam signed an agreement on Vietnam Navy's Petya-class frigates for an anti-submarine role, this upgrade package included: new sonar hydrodynamic navigation systems, anti-submarine bomb systems, fire control systems and new anti-submarine torpedo systems (economictimes: 02.07.2016). India's Larsen & Toubro Corporation (L&T) is expected to provide Vietnam with 10 high-speed patrol boats (once built for the Indian Coast Guard) worth US \$ 90 million (thediomat: 06.07.2016).

As reported by Reuters, it was Prime Minister Narendra Modi who ordered BrahMos Aerospace company to speed up providing Vietnam with BrahMos missile in late 2016. BrahMos is seen as one of the most dangerous cruise missiles in over the world, the superiority compared to other types of

missiles are its supersonic speed and accuracy. BrahMos missiles can be launched from above surface warships, submarines, fighter jets, subterranean launchers (soha: 01.04.2017).

However, in the recent situation, after Russia's disagreement on India's selling BrahMos missiles to Vietnam, by the early January 2017, India and Vietnam started their discussion on selling Indian-made Akash air-defense missiles to Vietnam. Given this missile is provided by India, it can be considered a step demonstrating the advancing depth and intensity of the security-defense relations of the two countries. However, Vietnam's purchase of Akash air defense systems from India is impeded owing to the limited strength and technical features of the Akash system which effectively functions within the range of only 30km, uses flammable liquid fuel and remains cumbersome and difficult to deploy... Moreover, Vietnam has also purchased Israeli Spyder short-range/medium-range air defense missile systems, whose features exceed superior to India's Akash missile system. Therefore, the purchase of Indian Akash air defense missile is not yet a top priority in defense modernization policy, especially when Vietnam has to take into account the balance of its public debt at one billion at a certain rate. This explains the reasons why India's 500 million USD credit package for Vietnam has not been disbursed according to the two sides' desired schedule.

Chinese media warned India not to "trigger regional trouble" by consolidating defense ties with Vietnam (Rajaram Panda 2017: 47). An I. Global Times independent expert commented that China will not stay still if India "rigorously enhances defense relations with Vietnam as a strategic arrangement or even a retaliation against Beijing." Furthermore, Chinese media also stated that Vietnam - India defense agreements are not only an ordinary arms sale but also a reaction in response to "China threat".

New Delhi also started discussing with Hanoi the possibility of supplying 533mm Varunastra heavy torpedoes manufactured by India's Defense Research & Development Organization (DRDO) (baodatviet: 06.04.2017). More recently, this type of torpedo has been equipped to the Indian Navy (IN). Varunastra uses an Indian self-developed launcher but can also be adapted to deploy from currently-equipped torpedo launchers on the Indian submarine fleet, including Kilo-class submarines purchased from Russia. Therefore, in addition to possibility of being equipped on surface warships, Varunastra torpedoes seize the chance to be geared on Vietnam Kilo- 636-class submarines, especially considering India is assisting Vietnam in training submariners. Besides, India also provided Vietnam with a 100-million-USD credit pack to purchase patrol ship for performance improvement of maritime security protection. (thediplomat: 07.04.2017). Furthermore, since the early 2018, Indian warships have made periodically-annual visits to Vietnam to promote defense cooperation.

3.2.3. Other cooperation fields

India has supported in training on information technology and English skills for Vietnam's military. On October 28th 2013, India and Vietnam signed a Memorandum of Understanding on establishing the Vietnam-India English and Information Technology Training Center at the Nha Trang Information Officers School. India also agreed to help Vietnam build up its capacity to participate in UN peacekeeping operations (thediplomat: 07.04.2017). In the 2016 official visit to Vietnam lead by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, a MOU on Cyber security was signed by Vietnam's Ministry of Public Security and India's Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology, equipment to India-sponsored Crira Gandhi High-tech Crime Laboratory were also transferred at the same time (Vionod Anand 2017: 341), (Pankaj K. Jha 2008). In addition, India is currently training Vietnamese officers and students of T-90 tanks at Indian Tank Armor Technical School.

4. POTENTIAL OF VIETNAM – INDIA DEFENSE SECURITY

4.1. Interests from both sides

From Vietnam's perspective, India is one of traditional credible partner, especially in diplomacy and national defense. Furthering defense cooperation offers Vietnam multiple interests such as: India possesses a handful of experience in operating and integrating weapons systems of different origins; this can be studied by Vietnam while it holds intention to diversify the weapon source beside Russia one. Comprehensive defense cooperation with India allows Vietnam to access to new types of defense technology with a more reasonable price consistent with Vietnam's tight defense budget

(nghiencuuquocte: 19.07.2016). Simultaneously, Vietnam may accordingly strengthen the ability to modernize its armed forces, improve the capacity to repair and maintain naval and air force's equipment.

Establishing strategic partnership with Vietnam is included in India's "Look East policy", which provides India with opportunity to gain contracts of selling weapons, equipment, military technology and services to Vietnam. Strengthening the defense capacity of a strategic partner in the South China Sea area means protecting freedom of navigation in relation to India's strategic interests. Additionally, it is such a benefit of Vietnam's support in the political field, including India's dialogue partnership with ASEAN, as a member of the ASEAN regional forum and candidates for permanent members of the United Nations Security Council.

4.2. Vietnam – India defense cooperation potential

Vietnam – India defense cooperation will definitely continue to develop in the direction of the strengths that India can support Vietnam such as:

(i) The two sides continued to exchange high-level military delegations to promote defense relations between the two countries intimately and efficiently, as well as to stress on the military-cooperation announcement of protecting maritime safety and security in the South China Sea to the outside.

(ii) India is currently manufacturing T-90S tanks under Russian license; hence, in the near future India can supply them to Vietnam, or provide spare parts and maintenance techniques for T-90 tanks for Vietnam. Additionally, India helps Vietnam upgrade its missile control and temperature sensor system for BMP armored vehicles, T-54 and T-55 tanks, upgrade Mi-17/Mi-18 fighter helicopters, radio technology using software-defined radio (SDR) (Dhrubajyoti Bhattacharjee 2017: 196).

(iii) Since India is a powerhouse of information technology, Vietnam continues to ask India to support Vietnam in training information officers and cyber-security forces as well as cyber warfare. India supports Vietnam's forces in building and developing the C4ISR system (command, control, communication of intelligence and reconnaissance system).

(iv) India continues to support Vietnam in training officers and mariners to control Kilo-636 class submarines, sell to Vietnam Varunastra heavy torpedo and patrol ships as agreed upon during the visit to Vietnam by Prime Minister Modi.

(v) India deals to Vietnam Akash air defense missile system, Brahmos supersonic missiles to equip Su-30MK2 fighters and Kilo-636-class submarines and missile-equipped frigate.

(vi) Vietnam is planning to purchase Su-30SM fighters as a "trump card" for its air force. The experience of using Su-30 aircraft of India will further help Vietnam in exploiting the maximum features of this aircraft as well as limiting accidents in training; India also supports and supplies for Vietnam spare parts and maintenance of Su-27 and Su-30 fighters.

(vii) With the competent capability of Indian defense industry, the two sides are cooperating to transfer technology to manufacture weapons and technical equipment.

It is possibly claimed that Vietnam and India hold a traditional and friendly relation. During the years of resistance war against the US, India showed its constant diplomatic support to Vietnam diplomatically with the spirit of international and impartial solidarity. The history has proved and paid a foundation for Vietnam – India relation to better itself with mutual trust. Facing unpredictable changes of the international and regional situation, especially the China's drastic emergence threatening the security of Vietnam and India; basing on the strategic interests of each country along with the efforts of high-ranking leaders, the two sides are determined to promote Vietnam-India relation to be worthy of "comprehensive strategic partnership", in which defense cooperation plays the key role. It is such a solid foundation for Vietnam - India defense cooperation to achieve more comprehensive and effective development in the future. It is the extremely important mission of Vietnam army to keep maintaining and promoting existing bilateral cooperation mechanisms, expanding defense industry cooperation, receiving military technology and weapons from India, and building up a modern regular army, persistently protect the national sovereignty and territorial integrity.

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