

The Growing Importance of Vietnam to India's South China Sea Policy

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Abstract

India has proactively engaged in the South China Sea (SCS), notably via boosting its naval presence and forging ties with Vietnam despite China's aggression. This article analyzes relevant incentives for India's engagement in the SCS, then examines the maturation of India-Vietnam bilateral cooperation in three aspects: diplomacy, economics, and defense. The joint efforts prove to be strategic as they help strengthen India-Vietnam ties given their shared concerns about China's growing maritime coercion.

India, while seeking to embed its geopolitical interests in the South China Sea (SCS), has found Vietnam at the forefront of its strategic calculation. First, the long-standing and problem-free relationship, with India's support for Vietnam's anticolonial struggle during its persistent fighting for independence and unification, has been essential for their trusted relationship. Second, Vietnam's position on regional security and its approach toward solving the SCS issue has proved beneficial to New Delhi's vision for a peaceful Southeast Asia.

While regional middle powers, such as South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand, have been reluctant to speak out about the SCS and avoid seeking close maritime cooperation with Vietnam for fear of invoking Chinese retaliation, New Delhi has strengthened security ties with Hanoi despite warnings from Beijing. Under the framework of the Act-East Policy, India has grown increasingly determined to foster closer linkages with Vietnam as New Delhi sees Hanoi as a strategic anchor for its Southeast Asia policy. For Vietnam, forging ties with traditional and benign powers has become the cornerstone of its efforts to pursue multilateral engagement. As such, Vietnam has encouraged India's closer integration with Southeast Asia, where Vietnam has served the bridge-builder for India and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). In the words of Pham Sanh Chau, Vietnam's ambassador to India, both countries share the view that ASEAN "[occupies] the central role in any evolving security structure in the region" and Vietnam would help India "extend its reach beyond the Indian Ocean."¹

The main argument of this article is: India's diplomatic, economic, and military actions all show that it sees Vietnam as the gateway to project its influence in the SCS. Thus, fostering India-Vietnam cooperation in regard to maritime security could then enhance the burgeoning middle-power relationship between the two like-minded countries, attributing a determined approach to China's aggressive posturing in the SCS.

Incentives for India's Engagement in the South China Sea

Primary factors boosting India's presence in the SCS are the rise of China in the disputed sea, India's utilitarian interests in those waters, and the burgeoning strategic weight of the Indo-Pacific region. China's rising power has led to India's wary posture, prompting involvement by India to safeguard its interests and deter Beijing's hegemonic ambition in littoral Southeast Asia. India's interests in the SCS, such as commercial linkages, freedom of navigation, and a rules-based regional order have consolidated Indian leaders' will to engage in the region. Simultaneously, India recognizes the vital importance of enhancing its status as an authentic middle power in the Indo-Pacific region.

The Rise of China in the Contested Sea

China's creeping expansion in the SCS since the aftermath of World War II could be summarized as follows: (1) 1946–1947, setting foot on the Paracel and Spratly Islands; (2) 1956–1974, gradually occupying the Paracel Islands; (3) 1988–1995, occupying features (e.g., islands and rocks) in the Spratly Islands; (4) 1996–2008, pursuing the strategy of “detaining land disputes, exasperating maritime tensions”; and (5) since 2009, conducting multifaceted expansion with high intensity of military presence.² The logic of China's rise in the SCS is that whenever a power vacuum became visible, China would take advantage of that brief moment to fill the vacuum and exert its domination.

China's unilateral submission of the Nine-Dash Line map to the United Nations in 2009 kicked off “a new phase in the legal battle over territorial and maritime claims in the SCS.”³ From the year 2009 onward, China has stepped up coercive actions to bully claimant states, aggravating the risk of conflict in the disputed waters. Tensions in the SCS have further intensified during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic,⁴ with China violating the exclusive economic zones (EEZs) and maritime waters of neighboring states.⁵ In short, China's irredentist claims of disputed islands and its aggressive tactics have accounted for rising tensions in the SCS.

To some extent, India views China's SCS assertiveness as a threat to the regional balance of power. India has remained cautious about China's SCS encroachment since China has, for years, attempted to curb India's military footprint and cooperation with regional littoral countries.⁶ If China were to dominate the SCS, India would find it onerous to access maritime trade routes and conduct oil and gas exploitation in the sea. Additionally, India's long-term economic presence in Southeast Asia would likely be put to the test in the wake of Beijing's maritime prowess.

Sino-India border disputes have further fueled the Indian people's negative attitude toward China. According to a 2019 Pew survey, 73 percent of Indian respondents saw China's growing military might in the SCS as "a bad thing."⁷ Tensions between India and China—whether tacit or implicit—are essentially shaped by both historical and contemporary factors, notably "the unique histories governing their formation as modern states, the stark contrasts in their respective political regimes, and their ongoing territorial disputes and geopolitical rivalries."⁸

India's Pragmatic Interests in the South China Sea

Freedom of navigation, maritime resources, and strategic interests play a triple anchor in India's SCS interests. India has paid heed to the peace and security in the SCS, as "the SCS is our business. We have historical rights established by practice and tradition to traverse the SCS without impediment. We have mutually contributed to each other's prosperity for two thousand years," India's former Ambassador to China and Foreign Secretary Vijay Gokhale said.⁹ When freedom of navigation in the SCS comes under severe threat, India's access to Southeast Asia, where it traditionally maintains maritime contacts and strong cultural bonds with regional countries, could be harshly undermined.¹⁰

The SCS, one of the most important global shipping lanes, also facilitates India's economic and diplomatic linkages with Southeast Asian countries. According to India's Ministry of Commerce and Industry, India's bilateral trade with ASEAN economies in 2020–21 accounted for \$78.9 billion and could reach \$300 billion by 2025.¹¹ There remains enormous potential for furthering India-ASEAN ties in trade and investment, especially in sectors such as infrastructure, tourism, e-commerce, education and skill development, and healthcare and pharmaceuticals.¹² As such, the security of the Indian Ocean's maritime route to the Pacific comes in parallel with the stability and security of Southeast Asian economies, with the SCS staying as the centerpiece.

In terms of resources, India has been carrying out offshore energy projects with Vietnam in the energy-rich SCS since the late 1980s when ONGC Videsh Limited (ONGC-VL) cooperated with PetroVietnam (PVN). Both sides discovered two large gas fields in the SCS, Lan Do and Lan Tay, of which estimated natural

gas reserves were up to 58 billion cubic meters¹³ with annual output averaging about two billion cubic meters of gas.¹⁴ Due to India's briskly growing consumption and stagnant domestic output, India's oil import dependence had risen from 83.8 percent in 2018–19 to 85 percent in 2019–20,¹⁵ with a significant amount of oil imported from the United States and Russia.¹⁶ Abundant oil and gas in the SCS could accommodate India's energy need, thus reducing its import dependence on American and Russian markets.

Regarding strategic interests, the SCS lies at India's edge, the junction between the Pacific and Indian Oceans, and is a strategic center linking East Asia, the Pacific, the Indian Ocean, South Asia, and the Middle East. The SCS is also a buffer zone, helping prevent great powers from launching a blistering attack on India. Having a firm foothold in the SCS could help India reduce its dependency on major powers for avowed maritime needs.¹⁷ In the face of China's growing coercion, India could harbor its strategic security in the SCS—a “pedal” to expand its strategic influence toward the western Pacific. In other words, the SCS plays the “Eastern shield” role, leveraging India's balancing influence against China.

It is also vital to note that the SCS serves as a strategic gateway to India's Act-East Policy,¹⁸ which indicates New Delhi's willingness to seek closer economic cooperation and political and security arrangements with Southeast Asia.¹⁹ Strategically, the SCS helps India expand its influence and tests its ability to play a meaningful role in Southeast Asia. In April 2000, Indian defense minister George Fernandes emphasized India's maritime interests extend “from the North of the Arabian Sea to the SCS,”²⁰ because India construes China's expansionist policies in the SCS as jeopardizing its national and regional interests.²¹

The “Indo-Pacific” Construct in India's Vision

India's prime minister Narendra Modi, in his keynote address at the 2018 Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore, for the first time articulated India's vision of the “Indo-Pacific region.” In his foreign-policy speech, Modi mentioned the term “Indo-Pacific” 11 times and espoused a “free, open, prosperous and inclusive Indo-Pacific Region.” Modi, in addition, underlined that ASEAN would remain the abiding characteristic of the Indo-Pacific and said India's engagement with this region would be built upon a five-base S' in Hindi: Sammaan (respect), Samvad (dialogue), Sahyog (cooperation), Shanti (peace), and Samridhi (prosperity).²²

India's vow to play a bigger role in the Indo-Pacific architecture received welcoming gestures from Vietnam. In his 2018 defining speech on India-Vietnam relations, former Vietnamese president Tran Dai Quang lauded the pivotal role of India and exhorted India's greater presence in the Indo-Asia-Pacific region: “In recent years India's rise has been closely linked with the prosperity and affluence

of Asia as a whole. India's peaceful development has always worked as an important and constructive factor to regional peace and stability. With its vast potential and great contributions, India surely deserves a greater role in the Indo-Asia-Pacific region and the world."²³

India has pragmatic interests in accessing Southeast Asian waterways and building capacity in member states of ASEAN. These strategic considerations stand at the locus of New Delhi's Indo-Pacific vision.²⁴ Southeast Asia, when viewed from the Indian Ocean, is the "backyard" of India, but the "foyer" of the Indian Ocean when observed from India.²⁵ India is at the center of the integrated Indo-Pacific maritime theater, where it has long worked as a security provider through its growing maritime role.²⁶ India's Act-East Policy, upgraded from its previous Look East Policy in 2014, has gradually been transformed into an Act Indo-Pacific Policy under the Modi administration, and India has located the Indo-Pacific region as the focal point of its engagement with countries in South, Southeast, and East Asia.²⁷

India's sphere of influence is increasingly likely to be restricted due to China's encirclement from naval bases in the "string of pearls" stretching from the Chinese mainland in the Asia-Pacific to the Indian Ocean and even the Middle East.²⁸ While China has embroiled itself in SCS territorial disputes, the spillover effects of geopolitical tensions could soon come to the doorstep of India. The Indian Ocean Region, where India has maintained friendly relations with regional countries, could foreshadow a new space for competition between New Delhi and Beijing.²⁹ China wielding greater influence overseas would pose a severe threat to India's geopolitical and strategic interests in the broader Indo-Pacific, where India has long been caught in an uncertain position given the rise of China's maritime ambition.

Middle-Power Cooperation: India-Vietnam Maritime Security Ties

India's dynamic engagement in the SCS has received Vietnam's unwavering support. Vietnam has been consistent in viewing India as a reliable strategic partner, and, for a long time, has considered the bilateral relationship "trusted and warm."³⁰ While India's geographical position in South Asia has traditionally supported itself as a vital performer "in the strategic calculus surrounding the Indian Ocean," Vietnam stands out as a focal point in India's perception as Hanoi lies at the geopolitical heart of the Indo-Pacific.³¹

Diplomatic Ties

A shared history of strained relationships with China, namely long-standing sovereignty border disputes, has long imposed a shadow over India and Vietnam's

political agendas. A certain degree of shared concern has inherently laid out a shared vision in response to China's maritime expansionism. While striving to play a more visible security role in Southeast Asia, India has been seeking to recalibrate its relations with Vietnam to address China's SCS ambition.³² India and Vietnam have continued to foster bilateral relations with frequent meetings between senior officials from both sides.³³

Staying consistent with its foreign-policy principle of pursuing "multilateralization and diversification of international relations,"³⁴ Vietnam has sought to foster relations with great powers to diversify its strategic options. Among major powers, India appears to have won recognition by Vietnamese leaders through generations as a "benign power,"³⁵ whose long-term presence in the SCS would help Hanoi accommodate its interests.

India and Vietnam have attached SCS security to their political agendas, where India has actively supported Vietnam's stand on the importance of upholding maritime security in the SCS, resolving disputes in accordance with international law, especially the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). For India, "maritime multilateralism" serves to address transnational challenges and promote economic activities in the SCS.³⁶ The 2013 *Joint Statement on the Occasion of the State Visit of the General Secretary of the Communist Party of Vietnam to India* stressed the "strategic engagement" in bilateral relations and "called the parties concerned to exercise restraint, avoid threat or use of force and resolve disputes through peaceful means in accordance with universally recognized principles of international law, including the UNCLOS."³⁷

The 2014 *Joint Communiqué* continued the words of the 2013 *Joint Statement*, reaffirmed India's view of Vietnam "as an important pillar in its Look East Policy," and expressed Vietnam's firm support for India's increasingly important role.³⁸ The India-Vietnam relationship, which was upgraded to "comprehensive strategic partnership" during Prime Minister Modi's visit to Vietnam in September 2016, continued to witness pragmatic ties as both sides reiterated their desire to jointly work "to maintain peace, stability, growth and prosperity in Asia and beyond."³⁹

India's outreach to Vietnam receives warm support thanks to India's public diplomacy, which is crucial to the promotion of intercultural understanding.⁴⁰ Additionally, the proactive role of the Indian community, the Indian diaspora of nearly 2,500, and community organization in Vietnam, notably the Indian Business Chamber in Vietnam, have helped strengthen links between persons of both nations.⁴¹

Intertwined interests serve as the leverage for enhancing bilateral ties. Vietnam's support for India's more visible role in the SCS has provided New Delhi with a measure of balance against China's maritime rise. Lingering maritime tensions that Vietnam has with China have made Hanoi a natural partner that New

Delhi has embraced to counterbalance against Beijing's potential adventurism in India's own neighborhood.⁴² At the 2018 Shangri La Dialogue, Modi articulated India's firm principles regarding "equal access as a right under international law to the use of common spaces on sea and in the air that would require freedom of navigation, unimpeded commerce and peaceful settlement of disputes in accordance with international law."⁴³ The *India-Vietnam Joint Statement* in the same year expressed similar principles as Modi's Shangri La Dialogue speech, and added: "The two sides reiterated that the parties concerned should continue exercising self-restraint and refrain from the use of force or threat to use force."⁴⁴ The SCS is at the locus of India's geopolitical concern, with Modi's "unmistakable references to China's rising assertiveness in the disputed SCS."⁴⁵

In May 2020, Anurag Srivastava, the spokesperson of India's Ministry of External Affairs, voiced criticism against China's aggression in the SCS by saying: "[The] SCS is a part of [the] global commons and India has an abiding interest in peace and stability in the region," and added: "We firmly stand with the freedom of navigation and overflight and unimpeded lawful commerce in these international waterways, in accordance with international law."⁴⁶ He was, of course, referring to aggressive activities triggered by China against other littoral claimant states, including Vietnam, in the SCS.

India's attitude vis-à-vis Beijing's maritime encroachment has shifted toward a firmer approach, which has been in stark contrast to India's aloofness and cautious approach "dictated by the fear of alienating China" under the Manmohan Singh administration.⁴⁷ In referring to the SCS, India has embraced tougher language and has been more motivated to balance China's coercion. In August 2020, India deployed a warship to the highly disputed SCS region, accompanied by a strongly worded statement from the Indian government: "Soon after the Galwan clash broke out in which 20 of our soldiers were killed, the Indian Navy deployed one of its frontline warships to the SCS where the People's Liberation Army's Navy objects to the presence of any other force claiming the majority of the waters as part of its territory."⁴⁸ In a virtual meeting with his Vietnamese counterpart Pham Binh Minh in August 2020, Indian external affairs minister Subrahmanyam Jaisankar discussed China's stepped-up activities in the SCS and along the Line of Actual Control.⁴⁹ This move, without doubt, showcased India-Vietnam ties in the face of Chinese aggression.

While the world grappled with the COVID-19 pandemic, China deliberately exacerbated the situation by deploying bombers to islands in the SCS, inciting a wave of anger in Vietnam. In August 2020, Vietnam's ambassador to India Pham Sanh Chau met with Indian foreign secretary Harsh Vardhan Shringla and briefed him on the deteriorating situation.⁵⁰ Vietnam's appraisal of the flare-up to the

Indian public showcased the true nature of Vietnam-India comprehensive strategic partnership and implied that Vietnam would likely continue to support India's freedom of navigation and overflight in the SCS.⁵¹ In December the same year, Prime Minister Modi and his Vietnamese counterpart Nguyen Xuan Phuc called for "peace and freedom" in the SCS and agreed to foster military-to-military exchanges and defense industry collaboration.⁵²

Economic Cooperation

Though refraining from voicing complaints against China's domination in the SCS, India has a huge economic stake in fostering oil-exploration activities off the coast of Vietnam, with ONGC Videsh Limited engaging in oil and gas production with PetroVietnam. However, India's seeking of economic ties with Vietnam was met with significant misgivings from China, claiming that the bilateral oil and gas exploration violated China's legal rights in the SCS. In 2011 *Global Times*, a tabloid run by the ruling Chinese Communist Party, called the India-Vietnam deal a serious political provocation and urged the Indian government to "try every means possible to stop this cooperation from happening."⁵³

China's objection to oil exploration in maritime areas offered by Vietnam faced India's own strong objection. In September 2011, External Affairs Ministry official spokesperson Vishnu Prakash protested against Beijing's warning by saying, "Our cooperation with Vietnam or with any other country for that matter in the world is always as per as international laws, norms and conventions."⁵⁴ During the visit of Vietnamese president Truong Tan Sang to India in October the same year, a firmer line emerged with the signing of the agreement on new investments in oil and gas exploration between ONGC-VL and PVN.⁵⁵

India's Navy Chief Admiral Devendra Kumar Joshi also termed the SCS situation "complex" and expressed India's strong adherence to economic assets and freedom of navigation in the disputed waters. Against the backdrop of Beijing's military modernization in the SCS, Admiral Joshi alleged: "we will be required to go there and we are prepared for that" whenever India's interests are at stake—for example, "ONGC-VL has three oil exploration blocks there."⁵⁶ Amid China's protestations that the exploration of Blocks 127 and 128 violated its territorial rights, India's state-owned ONGC-VL signed a mutual cooperation agreement with Vietnam's state-run PVN "for mutual cooperation for exploration in Blocks 102/10 & 106/10 of PVEP and Block 128 of OVL [ONGC-VL] in offshore Vietnam." The 2014 agreement was a determined move, which "did a volte face at the insistence of Ministry of External Affairs, which wanted India to continue its presence in [the] SCS."⁵⁷ By staying committed to expanded oil exploration with

Vietnam and publicizing its preparedness of naval engagement, India showcased its determination to stand in good stead with Vietnam.

In July 2017, Vietnam granted ONGC-VL a two-year extension to explore Oil Block 128, a part of which is within China's so-called Nine-Dash Line. The fifth extension of the exploration license implied India's strategic interest in preserving its economic presence in the SCS while Vietnam could continue to enmesh Indian's economic interests with its economic activities in the contested waters.⁵⁸ The extension was a strategic move since bilateral interests have been far more than solely a commercial deal. Vietnam's fostering commercial ties with India "are part of its strategy of seeking many partnerships with big powers while avoiding formal military alliances," and enhancing oil cooperation could be deciphered as Vietnam's concrete move to welcome India's growing role in the SCS.⁵⁹

Oil and gas exploration continued to stay at the heart of bilateral economic ties. Vietnamese president Tran Dai Quang, in his official meeting with Prime Minister Modi in 2018, encouraged Indian firms to continue oil and gas exploration and exploitation activities in Vietnam's continental shelf and EEZ.⁶⁰ In the same year, the two countries—for the first time—identified "models for cooperation, including those involving [a] third country" in their oil and gas cooperation projects.⁶¹ Vietnam's welcoming posture could be read as a direct response to China's irrational objection, and to a certain extent, a subtle counterbalancing move against Beijing's maritime ambition. On its part, India has, on many occasions, showed its commitment to promote oil and gas exploration with Vietnam despite Beijing's condescending and provocative actions in Vietnamese waters.⁶²

Security and Defense

India and Vietnam, while acknowledging the strategic importance of the SCS and their volatile position when it comes to China's rising power, are edging closer toward each other. Along with diplomatic support and energy collaboration, the two partners have boosted their investment in security and defense cooperation. The milestone of their bilateral defense cooperation came when India and Vietnam signed a Defense Protocol in March 2000, laying a comprehensive mechanism for regular dialogues between two defense ministers and possible joint naval drills.⁶³ In November 2009, India and Vietnam signed a memorandum of understanding on defense cooperation, which helped both sides consolidate defense cooperation and promote delegation exchanges.

In September 2012, an unidentified Chinese warship confronted the Indian Naval Ship *Airavat* while on passage from Vietnam. The naval challenge provoked deliberately by China was the first reported encounter between the navies of the two countries in the SCS.⁶⁴ China's naval assertiveness irked India's presence in

the disputed sea and strengthened India's resolution to enhance maritime ties and interoperability with Vietnam.⁶⁵

Basically, the shift in India's SCS engagement has been due to "its own evolution through the Indian strategic prism" and "security dynamics" in Southeast Asia, that is, the "rise" of China and its growing maritime assertiveness.⁶⁶ The logic of India-Vietnam relations under the shadow of the "China threat" gained much insight when referring to David Scott's SCS rhetoric: "Kautilya's logic also applies for India, his so-called 'mandala diplomacy' in which a neighbor (China) is likely to be antagonistic but a neighbor of that neighbor (Vietnam) is likely to be supportive."⁶⁷

Prime Minister Modi, in his 2014 media statement, acknowledged that "Vietnam has been at the forefront of India's engagement in the region," and "India remains committed to the modernization of Vietnam's defense and security forces. This will include [the] expansion of our training program, which is already very substantial, joint exercises and cooperation in defense equipment. We will quickly operationalize the 100 million dollars Line of Credit that will enable Vietnam [to] acquire new naval vessels from India."⁶⁸ Vietnam is procuring 12 high-speed patrol boats under the 2014 extended line of credit, and in April 2021, Vietnam launched the second high-speed patrol boat built with India's technical and financial assistance. The first India-made patrol vessel was handed over to Vietnam in December the previous year.⁶⁹

Though steering clear of getting involved in maritime tensions, India has stepped up military cooperation with Vietnam.⁷⁰ A more engaged India in the SCS would undoubtedly invite opposition from China. However, India's withdrawal from economic and defense cooperation with Vietnam due to China's imperiousness from "its superiority in economic production and a perceived divine entitlement to universal rule," would definitely be deemed by Chinese leaders as kowtowing to Beijing's authorities.⁷¹

India's abiding interest with Vietnam has stemmed from its strategic thinking—that is, viewing Vietnam as "a counterweight in much the same way Pakistan has been for China."⁷² At the same time, buttressing defense ties and providing Vietnam with naval and air capabilities would deepen India's ties with the United States as Hanoi has enjoyed a burgeoning relationship with Washington.⁷³ Indeed, the United States considers Vietnam as "the most strategic-thinking of all the ASEAN countries," laying the possibility of elevating the relationship to a higher level in the coming years.⁷⁴

In the same vein, US-India relations are drawing closer, and as praised by then-US president Donald Trump, "a strong India-US partnership can anchor peace, prosperity and stability from Asia to Africa and from [the] Indian Ocean to the Pacific."⁷⁵ In September 2021, US president Joe Biden said that "the US-India

relationship can help [the US] solve a lot of global challenges.”⁷⁶ With Vietnam as the lynchpin in the SCS, India can beef up its naval cooperation with Vietnam, notably when New Delhi and Hanoi are recognized in the Biden administration's 2022 *Indo-Pacific Strategy* as “leading regional powers” and allies of the United States.⁷⁷ Furthermore, India and Vietnam can also develop more robust ties with America amid China's provocative moves.

India-Vietnam defense collaboration received new impetus as India's Act-East Policy acquired a striking maritime edge, now that the two middle powers have a stake in ensuring the security of sea lanes and share concerns about China's domination of the SCS.⁷⁸ The Indian Navy prefers maritime engagements with Vietnam and has helped Vietnam build up required capacity for maintenance and repair of its defense platforms. India has helped Vietnam with “the procurement of weaponry and military hardware, capacity building, collaboration in the area of warship building and repair.”⁷⁹ In 2011, the Indian Navy offered Vietnam naval facilities used for training and capacity building, in return for berthing rights in Vietnam's port of Nha Trang.⁸⁰

Following recent inroads, India has emerged as one of Vietnam's key defense providers. India has firmed up military ties with Vietnam via initiating several military contracts. New Delhi is implementing a \$100 million Defense Line of Credit, which helped build 12 high-speed patrol boats for the Vietnam Border Guard Force.⁸¹ Security cooperation to “enhance coastal security and prevent illegal activities” indicates that the two countries have been working closely to enhance their defense ties.⁸² In essence, India's maritime security commitments indicate a soft alignment between the two like-minded powers.

Naval-to-naval cooperation between India and Vietnam continues to be vital given growing provocative actions that China directs toward Vietnam in the SCS.⁸³ Following the first exercise conducted in May 2018 in Da Nang, the Indian Navy and the Vietnam People's Navy undertook the second edition of bilateral naval exercises off the coast of Cam Ranh Bay, Vietnam within a four-day practice period in April 2019. The navy-to-navy cooperation involved a composite training program in submarine, aviation, and dockyard training, which helped strengthen interoperability and shared best practices from both sides.⁸⁴

Given the growing bilateral partnership, Indian ships have received invitations by the Vietnamese government to pay annual visits to Vietnam's major ports, such as Dinh Vu (Hai Phong City), Tien Sa (Da Nang City), Sai Gon (Ho Chi Minh City), and Nha Trang (Khanh Hoa Province).⁸⁵ Indian naval officers making regular visits to Vietnam have enhanced Indian presence in the SCS and made India's maritime commitment more solid.

While the SCS is evidently “a neutral navigation field beyond the sovereign limits of the littoral countries,” India “has not taken a strong position against Chinese bullying attempts.”⁸⁶ India’s balancing role so far has evolved around preserving the international rules-based order at sea while exporting defense systems and weapons to Vietnam.

While Vietnam and India have engaged in discussions on the possibility of Vietnam’s acquisition of India’s Brahmos and the Akash missile systems since 2014,⁸⁷ India is currently no closer to providing either missile systems to Vietnam for fear of antagonizing China.⁸⁸ There are other reasons behind this shortcoming. One is because India and Vietnam have not reached a consensus on the funding,⁸⁹ and another is Vietnam’s potential consideration of acquiring the Brahmos cruise missile from Russia instead of India. However, for Russia, the potential export of the Brahmos medium-range missile to Vietnam could undermine Moscow’s relations with Beijing,⁹⁰ which has increasingly played out as Russia’s ally against the West, especially amid Russia’s ongoing invasion of Ukraine. So far, New Delhi and Hanoi have been prudent in keeping their conversations behind closed doors rather than making their intentions go viral among public audiences.

Conclusion

The incredibly ambitious Act-East Policy, coupled with the emergence of the Indo-Pacific vision in India’s strategic thinking, has provided a rationale for India’s SCS engagement to secure its interests and balance against China’s growing military prowess. India has been increasingly susceptible to threats and challenges posed by China’s growing influence in the SCS and beyond. One thing is for sure: regional security can hardly be sustained as China is bent upon turning the SCS into its “internal lake,” and has patently exploited the weakness or forbearance of great powers to rub its neighbors in the wrong way.⁹¹ Former US president Barack Obama’s acceptance of Chinese president Xi Jinping’s 2015 promise that China would by no means militarize the SCS has turned out to be a naïve strategy. India, therefore, should make a fresh start by undertaking a counterbalancing role in the sea that China has long considered as its exclusive pond.

China’s hard-power projection, which India and Vietnam have been looking at over their shoulders, could drive both countries toward a united front to accommodate their mutual concerns. Forging India-Vietnam ties on the matter of SCS security, persisting on oil and gas exploration and exploitation and strengthening Vietnam’s military capability are striking examples of the ongoing sincere and robust relationship. However, the two nations should support a growing role for like-minded powers in the SCS, such as the United States, Japan, and Australia, while avoiding “a direct confrontation” with Beijing.⁹²

With an eye toward security in the SCS, India should fasten maritime challenges posed by China to its long-term interests and work closely with Vietnam to increase deterrence and defense against China. India, a traditional middle power, and Vietnam, an emerging middle power, should further embrace a more determined approach by conducting joint naval exercises. India and Vietnam could also enhance mutual support by participating in maritime dialogues and naval exercises, with “shared role[s] in regional decision making, strengthening maritime connectivity and focusing on steps toward maintaining a free and open Indo-Pacific.”⁹³ India’s joint maritime activities with Vietnam could augment Vietnam’s defensive capability while cutting Hanoi’s defense expenditures.⁹⁴

A strengthened India-Vietnam alignment in the face of China’s increasing aggression could send a timely message to Beijing. First, enhancing India-Vietnam ties in times of China’s maritime aggression showcases India’s willingness to foster its engagement in the SCS. Second, Vietnam seeking stronger defense ties with like-minded powers, with India as a prominent example, is likely to continue. As bilateral ties continue to warm, growing ties open the possibility of a strengthened partnership between India and Vietnam—and that is something that leaders in China must consider before strengthening their presence in the SCS. 🌐

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