

# A US–India–Vietnam Trilateral

## More Than the Sum of Its Parts

DR. MONISH TOURANGBAM

### Abstract

The article discusses the potential for a trilateral partnership between the United States, India, and Vietnam, given the growth in their respective bilateral relationships and shared concerns over China’s rising power. The article notes that Vietnam and India are dealing with territorial claims by China, and both believe in multidirectional foreign policies to balance different poles of power. The author suggests that a trilateral partnership would be useful in building a truly multipolar Asia, with no single power dominating the region. Defense partnerships are already growing between the United States and Vietnam, as well as India and Vietnam, and a trilateral partnership could focus on maritime cooperation and securing sea lines of communication. The article notes that the world order is changing rapidly, and a trilateral partnership could help balance different powers in the region.

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The Cold War-era intervention of the United States in Vietnam brought to light the limitations of US power and its role in Southeast Asia’s geopolitics, leading to a period of introspection. Today, the relationship between the United States and Vietnam has improved significantly. Moreover, the trajectory of US–India relations has undergone a notable strategic shift, coinciding with an upswing in bilateral India–Vietnam partnerships, as well as India’s ties with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

Given the similarities in growth patterns among these three dyads and their shared goal of building an “inclusive, free and open Indo-Pacific,” the time is ripe for a trilateral relationship between the United States, India, and Vietnam, in line with other such permutations and combinations among Indo-Pacific stakeholders. New Delhi and Hanoi share a vision for a genuinely multipolar Asia, and a multipolar Indo-Pacific would not be possible without a multipolar Asia. As

China continues its unilateral advances in the region, Washington should be prudent in teaming up with like-minded countries in the area.

### **Dealing with Multidirectional Foreign Policies**

Interstate relations are dynamic, and the contours of US–Vietnam relationship is proof of this age-old reality in international relations. A country where America fought one of its most unpopular and longest wars is today a strong partner of the United States in Southeast Asia. After the withdrawal of US forces from Vietnam, it took another two decades, until 1995, for the two countries to open normal diplomatic relations.<sup>1</sup> From becoming an important plank in the Obama administration’s Asia rebalancing strategy to the US Indo-Pacific strategy; the US–Vietnam partnership has acquired strategic overtones.<sup>2</sup> It took until the final leg of the Clinton administration to really kick-start a positive arc in the US–India relationship, and the Bush administration charted a new strategic partnership that has grown comprehensively over the years.<sup>3</sup> Simultaneously, the India–Vietnam relationship has blossomed into a strategic partnership.<sup>4</sup> No bilateral relationship is indispensable or sacrosanct, but the trajectory of growth in these three dyads—US–Vietnam, US–India, and India–Vietnam relations—portends a trend for mutual reinforcement of ties in the context of the geopolitics and geoeconomics of the Indo-Pacific. The time is ripe for a trilateral arrangement among the three countries.<sup>5</sup> China’s comprehensive rise is clearly the common thread stitching these three relationships together. There is a growing great-power rivalry between the United States and China. Both Vietnam and India are respectively dealing with Chinese territorial claims in the South China Sea and the India–China Line of Actual Control (LAC).

Both New Delhi and Hanoi believe in multidirectional foreign policies to balance different poles of power. Washington, which is more accustomed to dealing with formal allies, must find ways to build comprehensive strategic partnerships

<sup>1</sup> USIP Staff, “We Can Heal War’s Traumas; U.S. and Vietnam Show How,” *United States Institute of Peace*, 1 March 2023, <https://www.usip.org/>.

<sup>2</sup> “U.S.-Vietnam Comprehensive Partnership” (fact sheet, US Department of State, 16 December 2013), <https://2009-2017.state.gov/>.

<sup>3</sup> C. Raja Mohan, *Crossing the Rubicon: The Shaping of India’s New Foreign Policy* (New York: Palgrave, 2004).

<sup>4</sup> Press Information Bureau (Defence Wing) Government of India, New Delhi, June 08, 2022, [https://www.mod.gov.in/sites/default/files/pr\\_113622.pdf](https://www.mod.gov.in/sites/default/files/pr_113622.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> Sanjay Pulipaka, “India and Vietnam: Time for Trilaterals with the US and Japan,” *The Diplomat*, 1 September 2016, <https://thediplomat.com/>.

without forcing these countries to pick sides in twenty-first-century rivalries.<sup>6</sup> The world order currently undergoing transformative geopolitical, geoeconomic, and technological changes. The post–World War II US-led security order in Asia, defined by its strict network of allies, is weakening and becoming irrelevant to the challenges posed by a rising China.<sup>7</sup> Both Vietnam and India have unique geographic locations that influence their national strategies toward China. Balancing in the twenty-first century reflects the interdependence of economies with China’s expanding economic footprints in Asia and beyond. While New Delhi and Hanoi intend to increase their security and economic ties with Washington, they have their own home-grown methods for dealing with a rising China and want to maintain their respective autonomies and multidirectional foreign policies.<sup>8</sup> Vietnam’s latest defense white paper promotes “defence cooperation with countries to improve its capabilities to protect the country and address common security challenges.”<sup>9</sup> However, it also acknowledges that “strategic rivalries between major powers have become increasingly acute, sometimes turning the East China Sea into a “flash point,” potentially leading to conflict.<sup>10</sup>

### **Building a Multipolar Asia through Deterrence**

China’s assertive rise and its expansive claims in the Indo-Pacific region have sparked concern among many countries. Beijing’s unilateral actions have prompted these nations to come together and collaborate on the pursuit of a truly multipolar Asia, where no single power can dictate the agenda. India’s Act East policy, the US Indo-Pacific strategy’s push for a “free, open, and inclusive” Indo-Pacific, and Hanoi’s vision for peace and stability in its region are all aligned in this direction.<sup>11</sup> India has been strengthening its defense ties with Vietnam, and both the US–Vietnam and US–India partnerships are rapidly expanding.

<sup>6</sup> Nguyễn Khắc Giang, “U.S.-Vietnam Partnership Goes Beyond Strategic Competition with China,” *United States Institute of Peace*, 19 April 2022, <https://www.usip.org/>.

<sup>7</sup> Scott W. Harold, et al., *The Thickening Web of Asian Security Cooperation* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2019), 4, <https://www.rand.org/>; Giang, “U.S.-Vietnam Partnership Goes Beyond Strategic Competition with China.”

<sup>8</sup> Giang, “U.S.-Vietnam Partnership Goes Beyond Strategic Competition with China.”

<sup>9</sup> *2019 Viet Nam National Defence* (Hanoi: Ministry of National Defence, 2019), 24 <https://s.rfi.fr/>.

<sup>10</sup> *2019 Viet Nam National Defence*, 19.

<sup>11</sup> *Indo-Pacific Strategy Report, Preparedness, Partnerships, and Promoting a Networked Region* (Washington: Department of Defense, 1 June 2019), <https://media.defense.gov/>; *2019 Viet Nam National Defence*; and Narendra Modi, “PM’s Keynote Address at Shangri La Dialogue” (speech, Government of India, 1 June 2018, <https://www.pmindia.gov.in/>).

The relationship between the United States and Vietnam has shifted toward a focus on defense partnership, with US aircraft carriers making port visits and the transfer of US-made defense articles increasing.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, New Delhi and Hanoi have signed the “Joint Vision Statement on India–Vietnam Defence Partnership towards 2030,” with the aim of “significantly enhance the scope and scale of existing defence cooperation.” They have also signed a “Memorandum of Understanding on Mutual Logistics Support” and are working on building the capability and capacity of the Vietnamese Armed Forces.<sup>13</sup> The security of sea lines of communication (SLOC) is a shared concern for the United States, Vietnam, and India, making maritime cooperation a promising area for trilateral cooperation.

Both Washington and New Delhi see ASEAN as an alternative platform, in addition to bilateral engagement, to discuss regional issues. However, a trilateral approach can provide extra leverage to discuss common issues toward developing deterrent capabilities to manage China’s assertiveness in the region. Nevertheless, while there is a broad strategic convergence between Washington, New Delhi, and Hanoi on managing China’s rise, each country has its own distinct bilateral trajectory, and aligning them will be a task for the future.<sup>14</sup>

Both India and Vietnam prefer to maintain autonomy and pursue a multidirectional foreign policy that allows them to maximize gains and minimize losses without relying on military alliances.<sup>15</sup> With diplomatic relations spanning over half a century, India and Vietnam stand to benefit from geopolitical and geoeconomic changes in the Indo-Pacific. As India aligns its Act East policy with its broader vision of partnerships in the region, Vietnam is a consequential partner in Southeast Asia. Additionally, the US–Vietnam and US–India partnerships have been growing robustly with a focus on developing a comprehensive defense part-

<sup>12</sup> “U.S. Security Cooperation With Vietnam.”

<sup>13</sup> Press Information Bureau (Defence Wing) Government of India, New Delhi, op. cit.

<sup>14</sup> Derek Grossman and Christopher Sharman, “How To Read Vietnam’s Latest Defense White Paper: A Message to Great Powers,” *War on Rocks*, 31 December 2019, <https://warontherocks.com/>; Rajiv Bhatia, “India, Vietnam tied by strategic trust,” *Gateway House*, 24 July 2017, <https://www.gatewayhouse.in/>; Ministry of the Foreign Affairs, “Wang Yi Speaks with Vietnamese Foreign Minister Bui Thanh Son on the Phone,” Ministry of the Foreign Affairs of The People’s Republic of China, 14 April 2022, <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/>.

<sup>15</sup> Pulipaka, “India and Vietnam”; Khang Vu, “China’s Wedge Strategy Towards the US–Vietnam Partnership,” *The Diplomat*, 25 August 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/>; Nicholas Chapman, “Mechanisms of Vietnam’s Multidirectional Foreign Policy,” *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 36, no. 2 (2017): 31–69, <https://journals.sagepub.com/>; and Shivshankar Menon, “India’s Foreign Affairs Strategy,” *Brookings*, 3 May 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/>.

nership.<sup>16</sup> The distinct trajectories of China’s relationship with all three countries present constraints, but also provide enough reason for Washington, New Delhi, and Hanoi to seriously consider a trilateral arrangement aimed at jointly managing China’s rise.

## **Conclusion**

Hanoi and New Delhi share a common goal of building a regional security architecture in the Indo-Pacific that avoids great-power conflicts while developing enough deterrents to counter China’s intransigent behavior. Both countries prioritize autonomy and independent agency in their foreign policies, even as they seek partnerships with a range of nations. While each country has its own strategies for dealing with China’s proximity, they have found common ground with the United States to develop habits of cooperation.

Growing defense cooperation with the United States is crucial for closing the military gap with China and achieving greater defense preparedness. For the United States, supporting the development of independent powers’ deterrent capabilities in the region is a prudent step toward jointly managing China’s strategic rise. Despite China’s perception of coordinated frameworks as containment efforts, a US–India–Vietnam trilateral would be a significant signal to Beijing and worth the effort despite the challenges. 🌟

### **Dr. Monish Tourangbam**

Dr. Tourangbam is an associate professor at the Amity Institute of International Studies (AIIS), Amity University, Noida (India). He is also the honorary director of the Kalinga Institute of Indo-Pacific Studies (India).

<sup>16</sup> Rajeev Ranjan Chaturvedy, “India-Vietnam Ties, from Strong To Stronger,” *The Hindu*, 21 July 2022, <https://www.thehindu.com/>; Dipanjan Roy Chaudhury, “50 Years of India-Vietnam Diplomatic Ties a Trove of Opportunities for the Coming Decades,” *Economic Times*, 1 November, 2021, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/>; and USIP Staff, “We Can Heal War’s Traumas.”

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