

Vietnam-China and the Indo-Pacific

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Abstract

This research paper delves into the intricate relationship between Vietnam and China in the Indo-Pacific region, offering a multifaceted exploration across various dimensions. The study commences with an examination of Vietnam's demographics. The paper proceeds to underscore the growing relevance of the Indo-Pacific for Vietnam, on a strategic perspective. Vietnam's standing in the region is meticulously analysed, taking into account its historical and contemporary positioning amidst evolving regional dynamics. Vietnam's perception of the Indo-Pacific is a pivotal focus, examining its outlook and its strategic priorities within the broader context of regional challenges and opportunities, notably in the South China Sea. The study further delves into the development of Vietnamese South China Sea policy, encompassing territorial disputes and economic interests, culminating in an exploration of Vietnam's grand plan for the South China Sea. A central theme is Vietnam's "THREE NOS" policy, reflecting its judicious and pragmatic approach to regional complexities. The paper delineates Vietnam's efforts to enhance strategic partnerships with major Indo-Pacific powers, including the USA, Australia, India, and Japan, positioning it as an integral player in the regional security architecture. In addition to discussing strategic alliances with powerful nations, the paper offers details on Vietnam-China relations from the 1970s until their post-Cold War normalisation. In conclusion, the research provides a set of policy recommendations for Vietnam to navigate its complex relationship with China in the Indo-Pacific, emphasizing continued engagement with major powers, strengthening strategic partnerships, and adopting a balanced and pragmatic approach. This comprehensive analysis offers valuable insights into Vietnam's evolving role in the Indo-Pacific and its strategic imperatives.

Keywords: China, India, Australia, ASEAN, Indo-Pacific, South-China Sea, Island Dispute, Diplomatic relations, Strategic cooperation.

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Introduction

Vietnam, a strip of land shaped like the letter “S”, lies on the eastern part of the Indochinese peninsula. It is bordered by China in the north, Laos and Cambodia to the west, the East Sea to the east and the Pacific Ocean to the east and south. Three quarters of its territory comprise mountains and hills and it has over 3,000 km long coastline.



Image source: www.WorldAtlas.com

Its official name is Socialist Republic of Vietnam. Hanoi is the official capital with a land area of 331,236 sq.km and has 63 provinces and municipalities. The country’s currency is Vietnam Dong. As of 2019, Vietnam’s GDP was 6,037.3 trillion VND. The current Prime Minister of Vietnam is Pham Minh Chinh. The country also has various industries which includes infrastructure, manufacturing, retail, and food and agriculture. (Eye on Asia, n.d.)

(1) Relevance of the Indo-Pacific for Vietnam

The Indo-Pacific region has developed in the course of the twentieth century as one of the key arenas for disputes between states, competitiveness, and collaboration. The United States, Japan, Australia, and India are just a few of the major players in the Indo-Pacific that have coined the term "Indo-Pacific," which is often used to refer to "these two huge oceans and its neighbouring countries." Although most countries refer to it as "an interconnecting sector among the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean," its physical extent is characterised in a variety of ways. China, Japan, India, Australia, South Korea, ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations), and other island states in the Indo-Pacific rim (also known as littoral states) are important political players in the region. They also include Australia, South Korea, and ASEAN. For the new Asian order, the region has become enormously important on the political, strategic, and economic levels, particularly in light of two significant events. One is

China's rapid rise throughout the Asia-Pacific and beyond, which has forced other nations to balance the balance of power in the area. In terms of economy, A possible area of economic growth for the nations in the region is the Indo-Pacific, which serves as a hub of international trade and commerce. 65 percent of the world's population, 63 percent of the globe's GDP, and 46% of global trade in goods are all accounted for by this region. Additionally, this area controls 50% of all maritime trade worldwide. The Indo-Pacific is also home to some of the most varied global commons, making great-power competition over access to these assets a potential hotspot in the area.

The 'Indo-Pacific' concept is largely intended as a counterbalance to China's growing geopolitical and economic supremacy in the region as a whole, but the various parties have different ideas of what exactly it entails. As a result, a comprehensive picture of the area is still elusive. Furthermore, despite widespread agreement on the need to maintain a "free and open Indo-Pacific" a position supported by countries like Australia and India and argued by the US and Japan the countries are still unsure of how they feel about China's influence over how the region is portrayed. (Ghosh, Sarkar & Chaudhury, 2022).

Scholars have unequivocally identified the China threat as another factor in the development of the Indo-Pacific strategy. China has made investments in building road, rail, and maritime infrastructure in nations in Central Asia, South Asia, and Africa in recent years as part of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which aims to increase its influence. In many nations, numerous projects have sparked doubt and worry. With the establishment of its first overseas military facility in Djibouti in Eastern Africa, China has not only strengthened its economic influence but additionally expanded its military presence on the Indian Ocean. According to reports, the nation is encouraging the development of additional air and naval installations. (Thuong and Oanh, 2021)

As far as the Indo-Pacific region is concerned Vietnam a crucial vital region possessing a direct bearing on the country's standing, national security, and regional influence. Although major powers have different views of the Indo-Pacific, Vietnam, a country with a significant geographic location in the region, expresses the same vision of a liberal and rules-driven region, as well as a shared interest in preserving peace, stability, and prosperity as well as in creating a shared space for coexistence and growth along with the conviction of believing that the Indo-Asian-Pacific is big enough for every country to develop and grow. Vietnam's government behaviour and viewpoints regarding the strategically active Indo-Pacific area are being shaped

by its unique perceptions, positions, national orientations, and approaches. Pursuing laws and order will be a beneficial factor in ensuring secure, peaceful, and affluent prosperity in the area because it is an emerging nation in the area and the world with reasonably stable economic growth.

(1.2) Vietnam's Standing in the Indo-Pacific

Vietnam's geographical location makes it clear that the Indo-Pacific area plays a direct role in both the country's economy and security. There are several ways to look at its position:

(1.2.2) Geoeconomics

Vietnam is an emerging economy in the area and the entire world, with a rather steady rate of economic expansion. Vietnam's brisk economic development has increased its geopolitical significance. It is a significant growing market and a desirable location for investments. Based on information from the World Bank 2020. Vietnam's economy continued to exhibit underlying strength and resilience in 2019, backed by strong local demand and manufacturing that is focused on exports. In 2019, the real GDP expanded by an estimated 7%. The ongoing COVID-19 epidemic has had a significant negative impact on the Vietnamese economy in 2020, yet despite this, the economy has showed amazing resilience, growing at an estimated 1.8% in the early quarter of the year and 2.8% overall. Vietnam, one of the world's poorest nations, has become a lower middle-income nation because to its extremely open economy as it transitioned being a government-run system to an economically free market. Among the many vibrant rising nations in East Asia right now is Vietnam.

(1.2.3) Geopolitics

Located in the heart of the Indo-Pacific region, Hanoi is significant to ASEAN and plays a significant role in the region. Vietnam has significantly aided the cooperation of ASEAN in all areas as a member of the organisation, including the creation in the ASEAN community. Today, this nation "has participated actively in regional and global forums in support of the shared prosperity and security of the entire region and the world. In instance, Vietnam officially won a record number of votes on June 7, 2019, securing a seat as a non-permanent member of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) for the 2020–2021 term. Members of the UNSC clearly recognise the benefits Vietnam's strengths and obligations can have for the rest of the world given Vietnam's expanding role and position in international politics. Vietnam also assumes the ASEAN Chairmanship and non-permanent member of the UNSC positions in

2020, a year in which it was expected to advance in its ascent to regional leadership. A breakthrough in international trade has been made possible by Vietnam's ASEAN presidency, despite increased protectionism and a pandemic around the world. Vietnam took over as ASEAN's chair in January, and its diplomacy has proven adaptive despite COVID-19's restrictions.

In conclusion, Vietnam is a nation having a significant role to play in resolving many issues of the Indo-Pacific region, especially in the context of unexpected events in the area and globally due to multiple implications of global and regional variables. Vietnam has been working with ASEAN to establish a regional safety framework and economic ties that place a strong emphasis on ASEAN centrality. Vietnam is an important member of ASEAN. (Thuong and Oanh, 2021)

(1.3) Vietnam's View on the Indo-Pacific

The current geo-political hotspot on the globe is the Indo-Pacific region but Vietnam has its own views on the region and those are as follows:

First and foremost, the implementation of the Indo-Pacific: Free and Open strategy will bring about a number of changes in how discussions, collaboration, sharing, and the growth of international relations are organised in this region in general, and in Vietnam's relations with all players in particular. Many nations, including Vietnam, have revised their international and regional strategies as a result of these changes in order to update their strategic stance at the regional and international levels. Secondly, there are a pair of developments that are occurring concurrently in this region: great powers were promoting an open global investment environment; a global trend towards peace and cooperation; the Indo-Pacific region's dynamic economic development, on the other hand, is changing the regional security structure and the position of great powers; strategic competitions among great powers tend to plunge the region into fierce competitions and conflicts, such as the East China Sea, East Sea, Taiwan, etc. Given the rivalry for influence among the main countries in this situation, Vietnam turns into a battlefield. Thirdly, Third, Vietnam faces new strategic difficulties as a result of China's growth. Building relationships and national capabilities is necessary for protecting strategic interests. Vietnam's sovereignty over its territory and maritime safety in the South China Sea, as well as regional peace, stability, collaboration, and development, are all at risk as a result of China's expanding military actions in the South China Sea violating international law. In light of this,

Vietnam is compelled to strengthen its military in order to counter any threats and advance a peaceful and mutually beneficial relationship in the region by bolstering its own armed forces while pursuing multilateral diplomacy. Fourthly is the simultaneous existence of the plans and strategies of the major nations and multilateral bodies in the Indo-Pacific region, such as the US "Indo-Pacific: free and open strategy," China's BRI, India's Indo-Pacific Ocean Initiative, and ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific. Vietnam is viewed in this perspective as Southeast Asia's epicentre and the geographic centre of the Indo-Pacific region, which is expected to be courted by powerful nations like the United States and the Quad on the one hand and China on the other.

Vietnam must be aware of the characteristics of the free-and-open Indo-Pacific policy and understand how it affects Vietnam. The following characteristics demonstrate Vietnam's perspective on the present-day Indo-Pacific regional context:

Vietnam will face significant difficulties as a result of the region's potential for tension and the fact that Southeast Asia is regarded as the hub of the Indo-Pacific and China's BRI. Vietnam has a similar goal of a rule-based system that respects territorial integrity and sovereignty in light of the emerging geopolitical and geoeconomic circumstances. In regards to national security and military in the Indo-Pacific, collaboration is encouraged, according to Vietnam. Vietnam now shares its goal for an Indo-Pacific region that is stable, peaceful, and where governments rigorously abide by the law with key nations like the United governments, Japan, Australia, and India. For Vietnam, the significance of open passage in the Indo-Pacific region has been underscored by the rising volume of trade and other international activities as well as competing claims for the exploitation of offshore resources. (Thuong and Oanh, 2021)

(2) South-China Sea and Vietnam

In the South China Sea, disputes about sovereignty have arisen between China and Vietnam (Jennings, 2018). Tensions among the entities making claims in the South China Sea have significantly increased since China changed its maritime strategy there. The acts of aggression of non-claimant states have played a significant role in the conflict, and claimant states' mistrust have grown as a result, even as China has grown more adamant in asserting its own sovereignty rights. Like the Philippines, Vietnam is directly involved in China's maritime issues. It is crucial to acknowledge that since the start of the Cold War, both Vietnam and China have been involved in a number of bloody wars. Their disagreements about the Paracel Islands and the

Spratly Islands' sovereignty, as well as related disagreements regarding the boundaries defining their individual exclusive economic zone (EEZ), have not yet been settled amicably. Along with increasing military tensions and the risk of armed conflict, the China-Vietnam issue over the SCS also hinders the development of economic and political collaboration between the two states. (Tüter, 2022)

(2.1) The Island Dispute

Two islands, The Paracels and the Spratly's, that Vietnam claims to have ruled for many centuries, are the subject of a territorial dispute between Vietnam and China. Two white papers on the South China Sea that were released between 1975 and 1988 both reflect this allegation. Vietnamese dynasties were the first to wield peaceful, uninterrupted authority and state authority in the chains, according to Hanoi's history, in the beginning of the seventeenth century. But the scenario changed during the World War 2 because Imperial Japan proclaimed that the Paracels and the Spratly's administration was under their control.

Tokyo abandoned all rights, titles, and claims to the Spratly's and the Paracels during the 1951 San Francisco Peace Conference, which officially ended the state of war involving Japan and the Allies. However, Tokyo failed to indicate to what country the two archipelagos should be returned. Premier Tran van Huu's delegation representing the State of Vietnam "solemnly and firmly reaffirmed the rights" of Vietnam over the Paracels and the Spratly's.

Since the nation's reunification in 1975, Vietnam, having changed its name to the Socialist Republic of Vietnam the following year, has taken measures to defend its rights in the South China Sea, especially by seizing a number of low-tide reefs in the Spratly's. In order to provide historical and legal support for its arguments, it released three white papers in the years 1979, 1981, and 1988. According to Hanoi, historical and legal proof shows that it has "undeniable sovereignty" over the two archipelagos and that it is therefore unlawful for other parties to occupy these features.

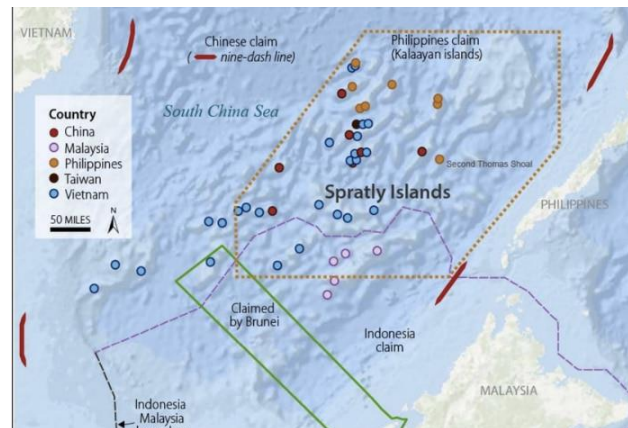


Image Source: <https://www.india.com>

The Vietnamese government defined its marine zones and continental shelf in a declaration in May 1977. In a subsequent statement in December 1982, it also stated the point of reference at which it calculates these regions. The National Assembly of Vietnam adopted the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) on June 23, 1994. These legal bases give Vietnam the authority to exercise its maritime sovereignty over the South China Sea and to engage in a variety of economic operations there.

(2.2) The Development of Vietnamese South China Sea Policy

The South China Sea conflict is a significant matter of policy for Vietnam, impacting not solely its safety as well as financial stability but also its interactions with other claimant nations and regional partners. Three principles underpin Vietnam's South China Sea strategy:

- (1) Vietnam argues that it has enough historical justification and a solid legal basis to substantiate its claims to the Paracels as well as the Spratlys, as well as its ownership of the EEZ and the land mass in the Sea.
- (2) It rejects the use of force and works towards a durable, peaceful resolution of the conflict in line with international law, particularly UNCLOS.
- (3) Vietnam collaborates alongside the other sides to manage the conflict and maintain regional peace while waiting for such a resolution. Vietnam's approach to the South China Sea is also consistent with its broader defence strategy, which is founded on the "three nos" rule: no armed collaborations, none foreign bases on Vietnamese soil, and no alliances with nations that may be used against third parties.

Vietnam's Communist Party, which is led by the Central Committee and Politburo, decides on national policy jointly. The committee elections takes place after every 5 years and the meeting

takes place twice in a year. The Central Committee only meets twice a year, thus the Politburo, that is made up of top Party leaders and meets more frequently, is more important in determining Vietnam's policies.

(3) Vietnam's Grand Plan in South China Sea

The phrase "cooperating and struggling" sums up Vietnam's South China Sea approach and represents the country's diplomatic hedging with China. This tactic comprises two seemingly opposing but complimentary elements: Vietnam "struggles" with China as well as other claimant states to defend its primary interests in the Sea while "cooperating" with them on pertinent matters to ease tensions. In implementing this strategy, Vietnam combines its engagement with China with balancing actions, such as enhancing its defence forces along with maritime law enforcement abilities and bolstering its outposts in the Spratlys; getting ready for legal disputes with China; utilising Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) mechanisms; and strengthening strategic ties with the U.S. and other major powers. Especially around the year 2010 when Beijing started to press its assertion of sovereignty over the land features and waterways behind what it refers to as the "nine-dash line" in the South China Sea, Hanoi has stepped up these balancing measures.

The Communist Party of Vietnam has declared upholding national sovereignty and its territorial integrity as the foundation of its social and political legitimacy, making it not only the most significant objective of Vietnam's South China Sea strategy but also a crucial duty for the party. The Party continues to emphasise its leadership in the fight for the country's independence and unification, which it has long used to protect its hold on power. The Party also emphasises its role in safeguarding Vietnamese interests in the South China Sea. Vietnam's long-term goal is to peacefully retake the Paracels from China as well as the parts of the Spratlys that are currently controlled by the Chinese government and other claimant governments. However, Vietnam is aware that this objective is unattainable, not least since China declines to take part in judicial processes to resolve territorial and maritime conflicts.

However, given Hanoi's commitment to a peaceful conclusion of the conflict, regaining them through military force is out of the question. Maintaining the status quo, which involves retaining its rights to both archipelagos while protecting the aspects that it occupies and blocking China or other parties with claims from occupying new ones, is a more practical course of action for Vietnam. Vietnam's immediate goal also includes preventing China from encroaching on its territorial waters by enhancing its armed forces and law enforcement

capacities. A plan for the country's maritime economy was approved by the Party's Central Committee in October 2018. It seeks to make Vietnam a "strong maritime country" by 2030 by developing a variety of businesses, from fishing and oil to tourism. To safeguard the nation's sovereignty, jurisdiction, and rights of navigation in the South China Sea, one provision under the Party's resolution is to strengthen the military and marine law enforcement capabilities. (Crisis Group, 2021)

(3.1) The “THREE NOS” Policy of Vietnam

Vietnam's commitment to a plan termed to be the "three Nos policy" has been one enduring and vital element of its strategic view and defence strategy. It is mentioned in the White Paper for 2019, which mostly addresses defence. The following is being stated in the policy:

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

Vietnam would refrain from using force in foreign affairs, including the threat of using it, according to the 2019 Defence White Paper, which added a fourth no to the "three Nos" policy. The Vietnamese government wanted to highlight the defensive and nonviolent nature of the Vietnam People's Army by including this fourth "No." As can be seen from the facts given, Vietnam is not likely to take part in programmes like "Quad Plus" or other non-ASEAN military and strategic alliance mechanisms in the near future. Vietnam will rather use bilateral methods to resolve its defence, security, and strategic problems.

Hanoi's attitude has been to seek solutions through diplomatic means and ASEAN-led forums, even with regard to the matter of a potential threat from China, that has attracted attention and discussion from around the world. Along with these strategies, Vietnam has stated a preference for unofficial agreements and help from the US, Japan, and India. (Mishra, 2021)

(3.2) Vietnam-China Relations

The diplomatic relationship between Vietnam and China is often complex and tense. Official announcements celebrating their common political structures and ideologies have been issued by Beijing and Hanoi for some time now, but these shows of goodwill have often been thwarted

by disputes over maritime territories, security-related issues, and geopolitical rivalry. (Thu, 2020)

Vietnam and China's relations took a turn in the 1970's. North Vietnam's and China's relations started to deteriorate in 1973 after the United States, South Vietnam, and North Vietnam agreed the Paris Peace Agreement. Following the agreement of the Paris Peace Agreement, China made an effort to assume a leading position in Indo-China relations. This went against Vietnam's aspirations and assumptions on its very own role in Indochina. After defeating the US and France, Vietnam attempted to assert its dominance in Indo-China. But China wanted Vietnam to submit to Beijing and act as the inferior partner in Indo-China relations. Beijing's "partnership" with Washington raised suspicions in Hanoi, which made the decision to tilt more towards Moscow.

Vietnam imposed socialism and brought about various reforms in 1977, which had an impact on a number of businesses that catered to the Chinese ethnic community. Later in 1978, there were other border confrontations between China and Vietnam, and in 1979, a diplomatic word war broke out between the two countries. The two nations experienced a standoff and ongoing animosity between 1980 and 1986. Vietnam kept balancing China and Russia throughout this time. On the other hand, Vietnam and China established diplomatic relations in 1986. Hanoi's decision was prompted by Beijing's strengthening ties with Moscow as well as Vietnam's own flagging economy. (Lemon, 2007)

(3.2.1) Post-Cold War Relations

During the visit of Vietnamese Foreign Minister Nguyen Manh Cam to Beijing in September 1991—the highest ranking Vietnamese official to visit China since 1979—the announcement was made that both countries will normalise their relations (Guan, 1998). Luckily for Vietnam, normalisation and peace were welcomed in China. Vietnam's departure from Cambodia and the Soviet Union's improving ties with the PRC were the causes of this. Vietnam moved closer to China after the Soviet Union fell apart in 1991 in an effort to find protection from dangers coming from the west. It was also decided that neither party would attempt to establish hegemony in the area. Vietnam wasn't given what it desired from the meeting, and problems including maritime claims and border disputes remained unsolved.

(3.2.2) Vietnam-ASEAN Relations

Vietnam formally joined ASEAN in 1995 for both strategic and political as well as economic reasons. Additional economic prospects resulted from this. Initially, it has encouraged more foreign direct investment from ASEAN countries. Second, Vietnam pursued its objective of economic diversification by utilising ASEAN and exploring other international organisations. These organisations included the ASEAN Industrial Cooperation, a sub-regional organisation, and the Asian Pacific Economic Council, which joined APEC in 1998. Even diplomatic links with the USA, EU, and other countries were formed. They were able to reach American and European markets as a result, which helped their economy grow even further. As a result, Vietnam's economy greatly improved, with a GDP of 7.9% in 1999, and Hanoi made progress in forging commercial ties with more than 100 nations. (Lemon, 2007)

(3.3) Enhancing strategic partnerships with major powers:

(3.3.1) United States

Although the relationship is hampered by Hanoi's reluctance to upset China, the U.S. is Vietnam's most significant bilateral ally in supporting its cause in the South China Sea. According to one academic, "the U.S. is the only country with the necessary material capabilities and political will to balance China, and it has also actually engaged in activities in the South China Sea to challenge China's claims." In 2013, the two nations established a comprehensive collaboration, and an advancement to a strategic level is currently being discussed. According to a former official, even without it, bilateral ties have already been de facto "highly strategic," with Washington supporting Vietnam's position in the Sea and giving it significant assistance in building its maritime capacity, and Hanoi covertly endorsing Washington's Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy and its involvement in regional affairs.

More shared interests create new possibilities for bilateral cooperation, including Vietnam's potential purchase of American-made weapons and military hardware, its potential involvement in U.S.-led regional security initiatives, and its potential use of military facilities by the U.S. For instance, Vietnam took part in the U.S.-led Rim of the Pacific military exercise in 2018 for the first time, marking a significant advancement in security cooperation. Visits by the vice president Kamala Harris in August 2021 and the secretary of defence Lloyd Austin in July 2021 respectively show the U.S.'s interest in developing closer ties with Vietnam. The

primary obstacle to developing deeper ties between the two countries is Hanoi's caution in highlighting its strategic alliance with Washington out of worry that it would enrage Beijing, which is trying to maintain a balance between the two giants. Vietnam is unlikely to let U.S. armed forces access to its facilities for more than sporadic periods of time, barring the unforeseen.

(3.3.2) Japan

In 2009, Japan and Vietnam formed a strategic alliance, which they later upgraded to an extensive strategic alliance for Asia's peace and prosperity in 2014. Relations between the two countries are cordial and strengthened by a high degree of trust. Cooperation in the South China Sea is based on close economic ties and shared objectives. Japan has provided significant support to Vietnam in the development of its maritime capabilities, including a \$348.2 million loan for the construction of six patrol vessels. Vietnam and Indonesia were chosen by Abe's successor and current Prime Minister Suga Yoshihide as the locations for his first official visit in October 2020, underscoring the significance Japan accords to Vietnam in terms of trade, investment, and labour ties as well as defence and strategic ties.

Suga stressed the significance of the Indo-Pacific during his tour. He declared, "Vietnam is essential to realising our vision of "the Free and Open Indo-Pacific" and is a valuable partner." Even the escalating Chinese aggression in the South China Sea was alluded to by him. (Mishra, n.d.). They also came to an agreement that will allow Japan to export defence technology and equipment to Vietnam. Thus, both nations can want to include Vietnam in a "Quad plus" agreement, thereby enhancing their ties to Australia and India. Hanoi may think about unofficially joining such an agreement and taking part in some Quad measures to balance out China's pressures in the South China Sea, while being cautious of Beijing's reactions.

(3.3.3) India

Defence cooperation was "an important pillar" of the strategic alliance between India and Vietnam when it was created in 2007. Since 2013, India has assisted in the training of Vietnamese submarine sailors. In May 2015, the two nations signed a Joint Vision declaration on Defence Cooperation for the years 2015–2020, indicating their commitment to increased cooperation. They expect to conclude a second declaration for the years 2021–2025. During

his visit to Vietnam in September 2016, Prime Minister Narendra Modi proposed a \$500 million credit line for Vietnam to use to buy weapons and defence supplies from India.

Since 2014, the two nations have been in conversation over India selling Vietnam BrahMos anti-ship cruise missiles. Although the agreement has not been finalised, it is still a possibility given that both nations have territorial problems with China, which they both want to deal with strategically. In a joint vision statement released in December 2020, Delhi and Hanoi committed to enhancing military-to-military exchanges, training, and capacity-building initiatives. (Crisis Group, 2021)

(3.3.4) Australia

In an effort to stop Chinese encroachment in the South China Sea, Vietnam is attempting to establish closer ties with Australia. Vietnam and Australia struck a strategic agreement on March 15 to boost communication between their top government officials. The deal, according to Australian officials, is an improvement to relationships that have been in place since 2009. The most recent collaboration includes commitments to address "security threats" and collaborate on "maritime policy-making." Vietnam is looking for assistance in containing Chinese ambitions in the South China Sea. Australia aspires to expand its economic and security ties to the region. (Jennings, 2018)

(4) Future Direction or Recommendations

There are opportunities and challenges for claimant states as the South China Sea develops into a battlefield for Sino-American strategic conflict. The perils connected with this great-power struggle may push claimant states towards fostering collaboration and defusing tensions even when the dispute runs the potential of turning into an armed clash. Maintaining stability will help to reduce outside nations' interference in the Sea, which is of special significance to China. The following are the recommendations:

(1) First, Vietnam and China need to move quickly with their agreements to define the boundaries of the waters outside the Gulf of Tonkin's mouth. The two nations delineated their maritime border in the Gulf in 2000, which narrowed the extent of their disagreement and opened the door to meaningful cooperation on fisheries and hydrocarbons. To establish confidence and advance peace in the South China Sea,

Vietnam should take into account cooperating in the fields of science, research, or marine environment preservation.

(2) Second, Vietnam should hasten negotiations with Indonesia to draw a line under their conflicting maritime claims. As a result of their prior agreement over the limits of their continental shelf, Hanoi and Jakarta should be able to reach a similar consensus regarding the boundaries of their EEZs.

(3) Thirdly, Vietnam could duplicate its successful models of bilateral cooperation in the coast guard and fisheries at the regional level, particularly through minilateral procedures, which allow a small group of coastal nations to build the groundwork for a larger accord. Given the front-line position coast guards take in maritime disputes, regular communication between them could help lower sea tensions and foster confidence for collaboration on global maritime issues.

(4) Fourth, in order to foster trust and cooperation, Vietnam and other coastal countries should encourage marine scientific cooperation. Before ending the initiative in 2007, Vietnam and the Philippines collaborated on four combined oceanographic and marine scientific research missions. More recently, they have expressed a desire to resume their collaboration. The political will to make the necessary arrangements continues to be insufficient, despite what appears to be a regional consensus regarding the significance of cooperation to maintain sustainable fishing.

(5) Fifth, Vietnam and other nations need to make their South China Sea claims compliant with international law. Some academics argue that Vietnam's baseline is "a bit excessive" and does not comply with UNCLOS since certain basis points are too far from its shore, much like how China's nine-dash line is frequently referred to as illegal.

(6) Finally, Code of Conduct negotiations should be concluded as soon as possible by China, Vietnam, and the other ASEAN members. The parties will therefore need to compromise where they can and reduce their differences. Vietnamese sources expressed mixed feelings about the potential code, with the majority doubtful that it would achieve the frequently mentioned objective of being "substantive and effective". To work on practical measures while remaining somewhat shielded from the diplomatic track of the Joint Working Group for the Code's Joint Working Group, Vietnam could

press for the creation of technical working groups on priority sectors like fisheries and environmental protection. (Crisis Group, 2021)

Conclusion

The current geo-political scenario revolves around the Indo-Pacific region and Vietnam has a great strategic location making it the epicentre as far as Indo-Pacific is concerned. China is considered to be a major threat in the region as it vies for a domination by propagating the nine-dash line narrative as it poses threat to Vietnam's maritime interest. Its location makes it clear that Indo-Pacific is directly related to its economy and security. Over the period, Hanoi has developed or has its own perception with regard to Indo-Pacific. The South-China Sea is an important arena as far as the Indo-Pacific is concerned and Vietnam has its own strategy to counter China in this region but unilaterally but through strategic co-operation with major powers such as India, Australia, Japan and USA or in short, the QUAD members.

With regard to foreign policy, Hanoi has always maintained a neutral position by maintaining a balance between China and USA. As can be observed, Hanoi expanded its economic ties and established relationships with China and the United States in the early and middle 1990s. However, the island disputes involving Spratly and Paracel Island, Tonkin Bay, and other concerns remain unresolved between Hanoi and China. The Chinese aggression at present in the South China Sea also worries Vietnam yet Hanoi has adopted the non-use of force and solve issues through diplomacy as mentioned in Three Nos Policy of Defence White Paper 2019. It has an island dispute with China, Malaysia, Taiwan, Philippines and Indonesia which is the Spratly's and Paracel islands as it claims sovereignty over it since 18th century. Vietnam has also adopted UNCLOS in 1994 making it exercise authority and here China poses a threat to Vietnam. This island dispute along with Beijing's aggressive policy has made Vietnam adopt South China Sea policy.

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