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Vietnam's strategic engagement in the South China Sea

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ABSTRACT

The rising tension between China and Vietnam with regard to the South China Sea has revised Hanoi's approach to its national defence policy. No longer benign and mute, it is taking an assertive stance and vocalising its opposition to the historical claims of Beijing. Hanoi is also becoming much more open to American presence in the South China Sea. This article examines the impact of geostrategic competition in the South China Sea on United States (US)–Vietnam and Indo-Vietnam bilateral relations, providing Hanoi an opportunity to challenge Beijing's illegal claims in the region.

KEYWORDS

Vietnam; Hanoi; South China Sea; conflict management; geostrategy; bilateral relations; foreign policy

Introduction

The South China Sea has gained global attention because of its geostrategic location and vast natural resources, such as rich fishing grounds and hydrocarbons. In fact, it has oil reserves of several billion barrels and an estimated 900 trillion cubic feet of natural gas, apart from other resources. These waters are home to more than 200 small islands, coral reefs and rocks, of which only about three dozen are permanently above water. The South China Sea is the world's busiest international sea lane. According to a 2016 study by the China Power Project at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), an estimated \$3.37 trillion worth of trade passes through it every year.¹ It is not only a critical maritime link between the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean but also a vital gateway to Northeast Asia and beyond.

The South China Sea dispute involves both island and maritime claims among several states within the region, that is, Brunei, Malaysia, Vietnam and the Philippines – all members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) – as well as China, Taiwan and Indonesia. The dispute has become very crucial today because of the increasingly assertive actions by China, including its militarisation of the islands therein. Consequently, the area has become a simmering pot of contest and conflict between the claimant states, further influencing how the regional security order is shaping up.

It is often assumed that China will try to act like a superpower and dominate the entire region if it gains control of the South China Sea. The fear and tension among the littoral states has been building up because of the mounting conflict, which came into prominence after certain developments in the Spratly and Paracel Islands in the 1970s.²

Vietnam, Taiwan and China each claim much of the South China Sea, as well as all the Spratly and Paracel Island groups (see [Figure 1](#)). Brunei claims a southern reef of the Spratly Islands, while Malaysia claims three islands in the Spratlys. The Philippines claims eight islands in the Spratlys and a significant portion of the South China Sea. Due to sharp divisions within the ASEAN, the conflict management process has not been effective and the association has not been able to take a binding decision on the dispute.³ In the economic domain, all 10 ASEAN countries are immensely dependent on China, which claims almost the entire South China Sea with alleged evidence of historical records.

In this entire maze, the participation of other political powers in the South China Sea dispute has also created tension for China, escalating the conflict further. China believes that the United States (US), as an external country, should not interfere in an internal matter of the Southeast Asian region that can be settled through bilateral understanding. However, smaller countries like Vietnam are becoming increasingly vocal about the dispute and seeking help, inviting American presence in the region. For its part, the US has offered assurance and displayed its commitment to the region through the evolution of its policies, such as the “Pivot to Asia” or “Rebalance to Asia” strategy and now, the “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” strategy. The US, Japan and India want Beijing to abide by the rules of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and allow freedom of navigation in the South China Sea according to international law. They have also supported and encouraged ASEAN in the development of a code of conduct (COC) for the South China Sea.

Against this backdrop, this article examines Vietnam’s role in conflict management in the South China Sea. Cognisant of its naval limitations and economic dependence on China, Vietnam is reshaping its foreign policy by partnering with powers like the US

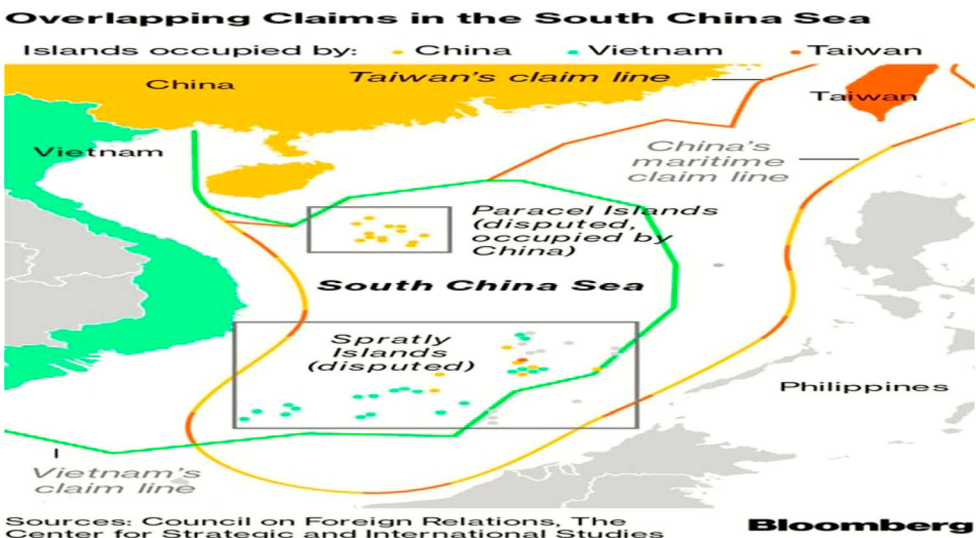


Figure 1. Overlapping Claims in the South China Sea. Source: Council on Foreign Relations, CSIS, URL: <https://www.bloomberg.com/toaster/v2/charts/1438ed8891d54cbaad80902423b51f88.html?brand=cojp&webTheme=default&web=true&hideTitles=true> (accessed May 4, 2021).

and India for its national interest. This article attempts to address Vietnam's strategy towards rising China and its bilateral ties with both the US and India. The next section discusses the changing dynamics of Vietnam's foreign policy; the following two sections discuss the country's bilateral relationship with the US and India respectively; and the penultimate section discusses the COVID-19 pandemic and current developments in the South China Sea, followed by the conclusion.

The changing dynamics of Vietnam's foreign policy and its role in conflict management

After the end of the Cold War, Vietnam's foreign policy was more oriented towards safeguarding its interest in Southeast Asia and its concerns regarding the South China Sea. Its strategy towards ASEAN slowly evolved after Hanoi became a full member in 1995. The country's contribution to the "ASEAN way" was assumed to align with a solution to resolve the tension mounting in the South China Sea as it gave Vietnam leverage, a bargaining position, against China. Vietnam's core interest in the South China Sea was, and still is, because of its economic and geostrategic significance. According to P.T. Tran et al.,

The economic importance of the South China Sea is confirmed by forecasts that estimate that by 2020, the maritime economy will contribute up to 55 per cent of Vietnam's GDP and will account for 55–60 per cent of its exports.⁴

With a per capita gross domestic product (GDP) of US\$ 231, Vietnam was listed among the poorest countries in the world in the year 1985.⁵ The country was heavily dependent on economic aid from the Soviet Union for over a decade. Also, Vietnamese radical economic reformers were highly influenced by Mikhail Gorbachev and thus, the Soviet Union became a model for the country's economic development. In 1986, Vietnam initiated the Doi Moi (translated literally as "restoration") reforms with the goal of creating a "socialist-oriented market economy", and the country started expanding its foreign relations with all countries, giving special attention to neighbouring states and big powers. Hanoi also adopted a new concept of "comprehensive security", which is still reflected in its foreign policy. As part of this, Vietnam adopted a friendly approach to China in the 1990s.

However, history shows that the Sino-Vietnam relationship has been a bitter one. Vietnam and China have already fought twice over the disputed islands in the South China Sea, in 1974 and 1988, which led to Chinese occupation of the Paracel Islands. In 1979 too, when China launched an offensive attack in response to Vietnam's invasion and occupation of Cambodia in 1978, its forces entered northern Vietnam and occupied several cities near the border. A territorial dispute erupted once again between the two states in March 1988, when the Vietnamese were defeated by the Chinese People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) during a clash in the open waters of the disputed Spratly Islands.⁶

Vietnam's relationship with China is further complicated by Hanoi's economic dependence on the country. The Vietnamese government assumed that Chinese investments may be a possible solution for deficit reduction and help increase its exports. However, the export levels of Vietnam became critical after joining the World Trade

Organization (WTO) in 2007. While the Chinese investments continued, the shortage of Vietnamese enterprises and lack of competitiveness further entrenched Hanoi's reliance on Beijing. Eventually, this economic dependence put Vietnam on the back foot when it came to addressing the tension in the South China Sea as Hanoi was apprehensive that China might impose economic sanctions on Vietnam.⁷ During the period from 1975 to 1978, Vietnam had already faced sanctions from China because of its nationalistic policies, enunciating its claim over contested territorial boundaries and developing a closer relationship with Moscow for economic aid.⁸

With regard to territorial disputes in the South China Sea, where Vietnam currently occupies 21 features in the Spratly Islands, tensions have risen again (see Figure 2). Since 2009, confrontations between Chinese state ships and Vietnamese fishing vessels have occurred more regularly. In May 2009, Vietnam and Malaysia sent a joint submission of their territorial claims in the South China Sea to the United Nations (UN) Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf. At the same time, China submitted its "nine-dash line"⁹ map, in which two dashes cut through Vietnam's exclusive economic zone (EEZ). This renewed map of China created fear among the neighbouring countries.

In 2009, Vietnam reported that Chinese forces had arrested three fishing boats manned by 37 fishermen from Quang Ngai province. It went on to demand the release of the fishermen in 2010, accusing China of a serious infringement and undermining Vietnam's dominion over the Spratly Islands. In 2011, the Vietnamese, again, officially protested against the Chinese State Bureau of Surveying and Mapping (SBSM) showing the nine-dash line in the East Sea (Vietnam's name for the South China Sea). In the face of growing Chinese naval presence, Vietnam started to modernise

Disputed Spratly Islands

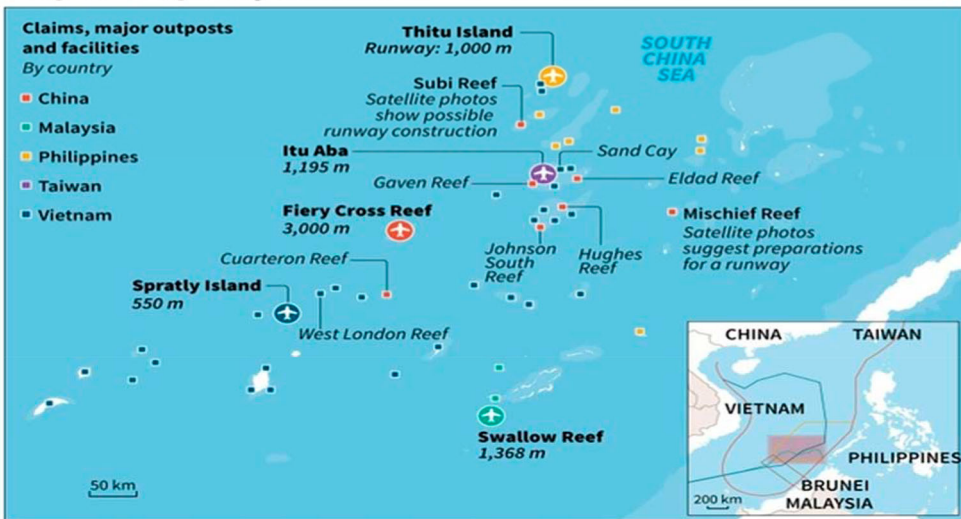


Figure 2. Disputed Spratly Islands. Source: CSIS. URL: <https://www.thepeopleofasia.com/articles/topic-health-human-well-being/the-case-of-south-china-sea-as-a-geopolitical-flashpoint/> (accessed May 4, 2021).

its military by increasing its military budget, buying military equipment from Russia, such as SU-30 MK2 fighters and anti-ship missile systems, and improving its defence ties with the US.

On 18 April 2011, at a government-level meeting, the two countries agreed to settle the issues in a peaceful manner in accordance with UNCLOS. Despite this, in May 2011, a Chinese marine surveillance ship cut the cable of an oil-and-gas survey vessel operated by Vietnam's state-owned energy firm, Petro Vietnam, in Vietnamese waters.¹⁰ While Vietnam wanted to solve the issue multilaterally through ASEAN, it ended up signing a bilateral treaty with China in October 2011. The agreement called for friendly consultations between the two countries on handling maritime issues and the adoption of a basic and long-term approach to solving disputes on the basis of legislation and UNCLOS principles.¹¹ However, as the Chinese habit of claiming its "rightful" territory remained constant, Hanoi was insecure and, over time, endeavoured to build its own maritime capabilities as well as utilise the "sea denial" approach to deter Chinese intrusion in the Spratly Islands.¹²

Many high-level meetings were subsequently conducted between the two countries, but remained inconclusive. In 2012 and 2013, China and Vietnam finally arrived at some key provisions, based on which agreements regarding basic principles were to be implemented over the less sensitive fields at sea. These developments were seen as a positive step in managing the conflict.¹³ However, China's claim on the extraterritorial islands did not change and its rebuilding and construction of artificial islands continued. In 2013, it launched a massive reclamation and construction campaign on seven reefs in the Spratly Islands. In May 2014, tensions rose again when China began drilling operations with an oil rig owned by the state-owned China National Offshore Oil Corporation (CNOOC), 120 nautical miles (nm) from the Vietnamese coast and 17 nm from Triton Island, part of the disputed Paracel Islands.¹⁴ This incident led to large-scale Vietnamese demonstration against the Chinese.

The Philippines was also physically blocked by the Chinese at the Second Thomas Shoal in the South China Sea while resupplying some troops aboard its beached Second World War-era, US-built landing craft, *BRP Sierre Madre* (LT-57).¹⁵ In early 2014, China developed an airstrip at Johnson South Reef in the Spratlys. Later, in August of the same year, PLAN vessels appeared at the Reed Bank in the Spratlys, less than 80 nm from the coast of the Philippines's Palawan Island. China engaged in more aggressive behaviour in the northern reaches of the South China Sea in 2014, including harassment of US surveillance aircraft operating in international airspace east of Hainan Island in March, April, May and August.¹⁶

Since 1973, Vietnam has tried to solve its maritime disputes peacefully by negotiating with China on boundary issues over the Gulf of Tonkin. By 2000, the two countries came to a conclusion on a certain maritime delimitation agreement and a joint fisheries cooperation agreement for the Gulf of Tonkin. These agreements are seen as a model of peaceful negotiation and successful dispute settlement. Based on the "Vietnam-China Basic Principles on Settlement of Sea Issues Agreement", Vietnam currently maintains three negotiation mechanisms with China: negotiation on maritime delimitation on the area outside the mouth of the Gulf of Tonkin; maritime cooperation on non-sensitive issues; and the possibilities of joint development of maritime resources in the South China Sea. On less sensitive issues at sea, the two sides have decided to put into operation

three cooperative projects on marine environment protection, search and rescue at sea and establishment of a hotline to settle unexpected incidents in fishing activities at sea.¹⁷ However, very little progress has been achieved owing to the differences on both sides.

Therefore, Vietnam has had no choice but to find some other alternative or mechanism for its military defence and economic development. An attempt was made on 13 June 2016 to settle the dispute over the Hoang Sa and Truong Sa archipelagos and other disputes in the East Sea/South China Sea through peaceful means in accordance with international law. This agreement could not be achieved; and the two countries ended up agreeing to settle the dispute according to Article 33 of the Charter of the UN and Article 279 of UNCLOS. This agreement also fell short of an ultimate solution for the claimants as China outrightly rejected the July 2016 tribunal decision in a case put up by the Philippines against China.

Complicating the matters further, Vietnam has not yet completed drawing its straight baselines in certain areas, such as the Gulf of Tonkin, the Gulf of Thailand and the Parcel and Spratly Islands.¹⁸ According to the tribunal award, the baselines around the Spratlys are contradictory as per UNCLOS. Therefore, it has been suggested that Vietnam establish a straight baseline for the Spratlys and Paracels within 12 nm of each other and an island with low-tide elevation located within 12 nm. Islands such as Scarborough Shoal, Johnson Reef, Cuarteron Reef, Fiery Cross Reef, Gaven Reef (North), McKennan Reef, Hughes Reef, Gaven Reef (South), Subi Reef, Mischief Reef and Second Thomas Shoal have already been identified by the tribunal as low-tide elevations. Second Thomas Shoal and Mischief Reef form part of the EEZ and continental shelf of the Philippines. Hughes Reef lies within 12 nm of the high-tide features on McKennan Reef and Sin Cowe Island; Gaven Reef (South) lies within 12 nm of the high-tide features at Gaven Reef (North) and Namyt Island; and Subi Reef lies within 12 nm of the high-tide feature of Sandy Cay on the reefs to the west of Thitu Island. In light of these conclusions, Vietnam needs to clarify the legal regime of the other maritime features in the Paracels and Spratlys.¹⁹

Also, a very important step by ASEAN was the 2002 Declaration on the Conduct of Parties (DOC) in the South China Sea. The transition from DOC to COC is under process. In the Joint Statement of the Foreign Ministers of the ASEAN Member States and China on the full and effective implementation of the DOC in the South China Sea on 25 July 2016 in Vientiane, Laos, the signatories recognised the need to maintain peace and stability in the South China Sea region and reaffirmed the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea and the importance of the DOC. The DOC requires the countries to exercise self-restraint in the conduct of activities, undertake cooperative activities in fields such as navigation safety, search and rescue, marine scientific research, environmental protection, and combating transnational crimes at sea, and to also encourage other countries to respect the principles contained in the DOC.²⁰

On 18 May 2017, at the 14th senior officials' meeting on the implementation of the DOC in Guiyang in south-west China's Guizhou province, ASEAN and China finally agreed on the COC framework. However, both China and the ASEAN countries are yet to finish consultation on the framework for the COC regulating actions in the South China Sea and are still in the drafting process.²¹ In November 2018, China and ASEAN had agreed to finalise the COC within three years, starting from 2019.

However, the June 2019 ASEAN Summit held in Bangkok failed to yield substantial progress over the COC.²² In 2020, another effort was made to expedite the negotiation of the COC for the South China Sea by the foreign ministers of ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). There are, however, many challenges to be overcome before the long-expected agreement can be reached.

Towards the end of 2019, Malaysia made a formal submission to the UN Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (sharing detailed information of the limits of the continental shelf which is beyond 200 nm EEZ). As expected, China immediately rejected Malaysia's claim and asserted its sovereignty and rights in the South China Sea. One of the major challenges is that of the 2016 Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) award, which declares China's nine-dash line has no legal basis. Therefore, there is an apprehension that if the COC does not mention the PCA award, then it becomes difficult for the COC participants to prevent Chinese patrol boats and ships from interfering with oil-gas exploration or drilling activities within littoral states' EEZs, which are recognised and protected by the UNCLOS.²³ It is thus essential that all the ASEAN nations must be in agreement on the COC, along with pressure from the UN Commission to adhere to the UNCLOS. An unsatisfactory COC can otherwise be a greater risk for the ASEAN.

Today, Vietnam is spending more on its defence budget than on improving its economy. According to Derek Grossman, though Vietnam's defence budget is a closely guarded secret, Western sources have generally estimated that the Vietnamese People's Army's budget will rise to \$6.2 billion by 2020.²⁴ It is evident that Hanoi's network of military-run businesses would raise this figure significantly. In 2016, Vietnam purchased a third pair of Gepard 3.9-class light guided missile frigates from Russia, to be armed with Klub missiles (sea-launched, land-attack cruise missiles). Hanoi also received another Russian-built Kilo-class diesel-electric submarine in 2016.²⁵ Further, Vietnam has improved its ability to retaliate in close naval engagement scenarios using missiles fired from the Gepard-class frigates and Tarantul V (Molniya)-class corvettes. In addition, it has greatly expanded its coast guard presence, fielding a force larger than those of the Philippines, Malaysia and Indonesia combined – all archipelagic and peninsular nations. These paramilitary maritime vessels are lightly armed to conduct maritime law enforcement activities as well as tactical reconnaissance and maritime surveillance in the South China Sea.²⁶

Vietnam knows that if its economic development and military defence has to improve, it has to strengthen relations with extra-regional countries, like the US, India and Japan, and the Philippines, with which it shares a common interest. For instance, after the tribunal decision in July 2016, Vietnam and the Philippines decided to conduct joint patrols in the South China Sea.²⁷ Therefore, to achieve its strategic goals, Vietnam has to strengthen its relationships with both neighbouring countries and outside powers.

Vietnam's bilateral relationship with the US

Vietnam responded to the American Rebalance to Asia Policy positively because of the actions of China, which questioned its sovereignty in the South China Sea. According to the US Department of Defense, Washington, DC established diplomatic relations with Hanoi in 1950, but the formal normalisation of diplomatic relations happened only in 1995 after an announcement by President Bill Clinton. He became the first post-war

US President to visit Vietnam in the year 2000. In the 2000s, the US and Vietnam began to exchange high-level visits and conducted a series of security and defence dialogues. In 2012, as a part of President Obama's Rebalance strategy, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton reiterated the potential of the US–Vietnam relationship and urged taking it to another level, while simultaneously emphasising the importance of human rights issues. In June 2012, Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta visited Cam Ranh Bay aboard a US naval supply ship and hosted a delegation of senior Vietnamese military officers. In response to Vietnamese lobbying, the US also moderately relaxed the limitations on the sale of lethal weaponry to Vietnam. There was a clear signal that Washington was also ready to assist Vietnam with its coast guard and maritime domain awareness, including coastal radars, communications systems and reconnaissance aircraft.²⁸

In May 2016, the US fully lifted its ban “on the sale of lethal weapons to Vietnam and continued to provide Vietnam with maritime security assistance ... through the Maritime Security Initiative, the Cooperative Threat Reduction Program, and Foreign Military Financing.”²⁹ The same year, the two countries also signed a letter of intent to establish a working group for the Cooperative Humanitarian and Medical Storage Initiative, advancing its cooperation on disaster relief and humanitarian assistance. The US also expressed its commitment to assist Vietnam's first deployment of UN peacekeeping forces by 2017.³⁰

Ten years after its 2009 National Defence White Paper, Vietnam released the 2019 National Defence White Paper in November of that year, specifying challenges to national defence and adjustments to its national defence policy. A significant reference to Beijing's territorial claims was made by stating historical divergences over sovereignty in the East Sea (South China Sea). Vietnam also reiterated its emphasis on developing necessary and appropriate defence and military relations with other countries that signified, to some extent, potential security cooperation with the US. The 2019 National Defence White Paper by Vietnam has been considered cautious and balanced in terms of identifying China as a problem.³¹ Although Hanoi had not publicly stated its intent to develop ties directly with the US, the official protest raised by the US over Beijing's harassment of international drilling near the Vanguard Bank of Vietnam was clearly a step forward in the budding relationship. Further, Vietnam and the US increased their engagement through military exercises, the first of which was the US–ASEAN maritime exercise in September 2019.³² Hanoi's outreach to the US was further recognised through the second visit by US aircraft carrier, *USS Theodore Roosevelt*, in March 2020.

In 2020, the US appears to have taken a more proactive role in deterring China's expansion in the South China Sea. According to Minnie Chan, satellite imagery shows the signs of developments taking place in the remote base of Wake Island, a territory between Guam and Hawaii run by the US Air Force as a defensive “buffer” in the Western Pacific.³³ While Vietnam has remained quiet with regard to the new Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy of the US, the strategy is largely in its national interest. A positive response from Vietnam is likely as both the US and Vietnam share common concerns in the South China Sea dispute.³⁴ The US also expects India to play a significant role in the Indo-Pacific region. For its part, India has called for adherence to international law and freedom of navigation in the South China Sea. For now, the Indo-Pacific strategy is just a vision that is yet to materialise. However, the American concern to forge a regional security policy with its allies is increasingly coming to the fore.

With the coming of the Biden administration, the trajectory of US–Vietnam relations in the coming years is seen as a positive so far. Both the countries have maintained their mutual interest with regard to China’s growing economic and military power. One problem that Vietnam might face with Washington is a sanction on Hanoi because Biden administration has taken a hard line against Vietnam’s ally Russia. For instance, Biden’s phone call with Russia’s President Putin over “Moscow’s alleged involvement in a massive cyber espionage operation as well as the arrest of opposition leader Alexei Navalny.” Also, Biden’s tough approach might enhance the enforcement of “Countering America’s Adversaries Through Threat of Sanctions Act (CAATSA) on allies and partners.”³⁵ However, the continuous tension in the South China Sea might bring Hanoi and Washington to develop closer ties in future.

Vietnam’s bilateral relationship with India

We realise that our efforts to bring economic prosperity to our people need to be accompanied by steps to secure them. The Prime Minister and I have, therefore, agreed to deepen our defence and security engagement to advance our common interests. The agreement on construction of offshore patrol boats signed earlier today is one of the steps to give concrete shape to our defence engagement. I am also happy to announce a new Defence Line of Credit for Vietnam of US\$ Five Hundred million for facilitating deeper defence cooperation. The range of agreements signed just a while ago point to the diversity and depth of our cooperation. — Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, September 3, 2016, on his visit to Vietnam³⁶

From the beginning of this century, Vietnam started pushing for stronger ties with India because of the mutual interests of both the countries. In 2007, Vietnam signed a 33-point partnership declaration with India. In 2014, India’s state-run firm, Oil and Natural Gas Corporation (ONGC), and Petro Vietnam Exploration Production Corporation signed an agreement to explore three oil blocks. When Vietnamese Foreign Minister Pham Binh visited New Delhi in July 2017, he conveyed to President Pranab Mukherjee that Vietnam wanted to step up the “Comprehensive Strategic Partnership” established during Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s visit to the country in 2016. India not only offered Vietnam a line of credit to buy weapons but also provide training to Vietnamese sailors. The two countries also agreed to accelerate the production of patrol vessels for Vietnam, along with providing assistance in naval training. India too desired to establish stronger ties with Vietnam as part of its “Act East Policy” and promote greater defence partnership.³⁷ Currently, India and Vietnam are closely cooperating in various regional forums, such as ASEAN, East Asia Summit, Mekong–Ganga Cooperation (MGC) and Asia–Europe Meeting (ASEM), besides the UN and WTO.³⁸

India’s partnership with Vietnam is seen as a threat by China. In the past, China has warned Vietnam about its ties with India.³⁹ For Vietnam, a partnership with India strengthens its economy and military defence. However, as India has its own stake in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), it has refused to officially take the side of any party in the South China Sea dispute. It has also refused to patrol with the US. In strategic circles, it is believed that New Delhi also fears repercussions from the US freedom of navigation strategy as it could be similarly applied by Beijing in the IOR, countering

the narrative of US freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs) in the South China Sea.⁴⁰

However, this narrative cannot justifiably be applied by Beijing in the IOR as the context is totally different from the South China Sea. The South China Sea has many claimants and has been a disputed territory for many decades. Beijing claims complete sovereignty over the islands and surrounding waters in the South China Sea, whereas it does not have any dispute or claims as such in the Indian Ocean. India aspires to become a “net security provider” in the Indo-Pacific region, which is supported by the US and Japan. The fact that India does not have any territorial disputes with the ASEAN countries helps the country’s position to assume such a role. In September 2019, a Chinese research vessel was found operating in Indian waters in the Andaman Sea. However, it retreated when confronted by an Indian warship. So far, there have been no instances of Chinese vessels challenging Indian sovereignty or venturing close to Indian islands with malicious intent. Nor have Chinese warships and submarines hampered the passage of Indian merchant vessels in regional sea lanes. That said, Chinese presence has greatly increased in the Indian Ocean in recent years, causing much concern to New Delhi. Beijing’s maritime shift in South and Southeast Asia signifies a bleak future for India. India’s real apprehension is that a greater Chinese presence in its maritime neighbourhood could result in the upending of India’s authority and leverage in its perceived sphere of influence.⁴¹

A significant development that clearly identifies India’s high stakes in Vietnam’s defence and security is the “US\$ 500 million Line of Credit for defence” procurement announced in 2016 by Prime Minister Modi.⁴² To date, there has been a delay in the signing of the framework agreement for implementing this line of credit. There have been reports that Vietnam wants to use it for development and infrastructure, whereas the Indian government is insisting on defence-related purchases only. Hanoi is an emerging pivotal state of India’s Act East Policy as the rise of China and its belligerence in the South China Sea are security concerns for both countries. China’s desire to expand its influence in South Asia and the IOR is evident through its port projects in Sri Lanka and Maldives.

India has also increased its engagement with Southeast Asia. Vietnam is already a part of India’s multinational naval exercise, MILAN. It has also permitted India to use its port in Nha Trang, situated strategically in Cam Ranh Bay. The Indian Navy is training around 500 Vietnamese sailors in comprehensive underwater combat at its submarine facility, INS Satavahana, while the Indian Air Force offers pilot conversion training to the Vietnamese Air Force.⁴³ Further, Vietnam has now allowed India to set up a satellite imaging and tracking centre on its own land; in exchange, it will have access to images covering the region generated by Indian satellites. This will give Hanoi more leverage and capability to keep a check on Chinese activities in the South China Sea.⁴⁴

In terms of trade, India is now among Vietnam’s top ten trading partners. During Prime Minister Modi’s visit in 2016, the two nations made an agreement to explore substantive and practical measures, like the Joint Sub-Commission on Trade, to achieve a trade target of US\$ 15 billion by 2020. They also signed a civil nuclear agreement to further boost their bilateral trade. The first major Indian investment came from ONGC Videsh Limited (OVL) in 1989, off the coast of Vung Tau, located east of Ho Chi Minh City. In the economic realm, areas such as energy, mineral exploration,

agro-processing, healthcare, information technology (IT) and education, among others, will help boost existing ties.⁴⁵

During President Tran Dai Quang's visit to India in March 2018, the two countries issued a joint statement that indirectly lends support to the Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy by referring to some of its key elements. Specifically, the two sides reiterated "the importance of achieving a peaceful and prosperous Indo-Pacific region where sovereignty and international law, freedom of navigation and overflight, sustainable development and a free, fair and open trade and investment system" are respected.⁴⁶ President Quang also praised India's peaceful development as "an important and constructive factor to regional peace and stability", and claimed that "with her vast potential and great contributions, India surely deserves a greater role in the Indo-Asia-Pacific region and the world".⁴⁷

The COVID-19 pandemic and developments in the South China Sea

The COVID-19 pandemic has upended daily life and caused a major global crisis, leading to further deterioration of the relationship between the US and China. Despite the pandemic, the dispute in the South China Sea continues to simmer. As mentioned earlier, there are reports that the US has been involved in a major development on Wake Island, a remote outpost deep in the Pacific, situated between Japan and Hawaii.⁴⁸ The secretive, remote base has been receiving an outpouring of investment in recent years owing to its strategic importance. This development is being observed as a counter mechanism to any rising tensions not only from China but also from North Korea and Russia.⁴⁹

The South China Sea remains a playing field for geostrategic competition, giving rise to competitive dynamics among great powers and rising challengers seeking hegemony in the Indo-Pacific region. Given the massive challenges imposed by the healthcare crisis leading to loss of lives, diminished economic activity and massive unemployment, it would seem China has its hands full. However, during the first six months of 2020 alone, Beijing has seemingly become more relentless in its pursuit of flexing its muscle and attaining hegemonic status. The continuous undermining of Hong Kong's freedom and autonomy, in addition to passing the National Security Law, has highlighted the end of the "One Country, Two Systems" policy in Hong Kong. The brutal killing of 20 Indian soldiers at the disputed Galwan Valley in eastern Ladakh by Chinese troops as the result of a tense military standoff has been one of the worst crises along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) between India and China in decades.

If that were not enough, China has continued with its massive belligerent development in the South China Sea. The highly provocative Chinese military drills and illegal territorial claims have recently been called out not only by the US and Japan but by Beijing's key Southeast Asian neighbours – Vietnam, the Philippines and Malaysia – as well.⁵⁰ On 11 July 2020, the US and "Vietnam commemorated the 25th anniversary" of the diplomatic ties established under President Bill Clinton. Just two days later, on 13 July 2020, describing a more strengthened US policy, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo announced a formal rejection of "most" of China's maritime claims in the South China Sea, after the latest escalation between Washington and Beijing.⁵¹

Fresh rounds of escalating bilateral tensions in 2020 have resulted in Hanoi airing its grievances more publicly.⁵² For the first time, an official Vietnamese position on the legal status of all high-tide features in both the Spratly and Paracel Islands was submitted to the UN on 30 March 2020. The “Note Verbale” elucidates Vietnam’s claims in the South China Sea, showcasing a much-needed divergence from its earlier policies of caution and cooperation when it came to dealing with China.⁵³

The forward presence of the US Navy has also increased considerably, as noted with the dispatch of several warships, including *USS America* (LHA-6), to conduct presence operations in order to counter the standoff between *Haiyang Dizhi 8* (Chinese government-owned research vessel) and *West Capella* (a drillship hired by Malaysia’s state-owned company), from mid-April to early May 2020.⁵⁴ Recently, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo also rejected the nine-dash line claim by China and stated that “[t]he PRC has no legal grounds to unilaterally impose its will on the region.”⁵⁵

In 2010, Vietnam had taken advantage of its chairmanship of ASEAN to bring up the issue of the South China Sea dispute. The US subsequently helped internationalise the dispute. In 2020, Vietnam has chaired the ASEAN well, though the pandemic has caused inconveniences. During the Chairman’s Statement of the 37th ASEAN Summit, ASEAN has reaffirmed the significance of upholding and promoting peace, stability, security and freedom of navigation in, and overflight above, the South China Sea, especially during the common fight against COVID-19. It has also affirmed the effective implementation of the “2002 Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC)” in its entirety, as well as upholding the international law, including the 1982 UNCLOS.⁵⁶ Vietnam is also a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council for the year 2021–22, giving Hanoi the chance to intensify its stance in the South China Sea conflict.⁵⁷ This could also be an opportunity to impel Beijing to sign the COC, which has been pending since the 2002 Declaration. The evolving relationship between the US and Vietnam has been strengthened because of the aggressive behaviour of China and its militarisation in the South China Sea. This is also an opportunity for Hanoi to consider appropriate defence and military relations with other countries unified in countering China throughout the Indo-Pacific region to maintain a rule-based order.

Over the last few years, the tensions in the South China Sea have remained conflicted, impacting fishing and natural resources exploration. Even during the pandemic, the clashes in the South China Sea between Hanoi and Beijing have continued. The *South China Morning Post* has reported an incident of a Chinese ship and Vietnamese fishing boat colliding near the Paracel Islands on 3 April 2020.⁵⁸ According to the report by a Washington-based think tank, “Vietnam has been building up its defences in the Spratly Islands over the past two years to ensure that it can strike Chinese facilities.” One of the most significant upgrades is at the “West Reef and Sin Cowe Island”, with an installation of emplacement “for air and coastal defence systems” on most of Vietnam’s bases in the Spratlys.⁵⁹

Conclusion

Initially, Vietnam’s response to the Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy was muted because of President Donald Trump’s transactional approach and exit from the Trans-

Pacific Partnership (TPP), leaving a big question mark hanging over the US allies. However, Vietnam is likely to continue to deepen its strategic cooperation with the major powers, especially members of the Quad (or Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, an informal strategic forum between the US, Japan, Australia and India), to enhance collaborative security in the region and strengthen its bargaining position vis-à-vis China.⁶⁰

Vietnam has thus far managed to keep its relationship with China on an even keel. The two countries even celebrated 2010 as the Year of Friendship “to mark the 60th anniversary” of diplomatic relations. According to Alexander L. Vuving, a Vietnam specialist at the Daniel K. Inouye Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies in Hawaii, Vietnam stopped drilling in the South China Sea because of the fear of a potential riposte from the Chinese Navy.⁶¹ That said, he calculates that Vietnam has doubled the size of its coast guard from 2013 to 2017. The country has also started investing in maritime surveillance capabilities, including training its crews to operate the six new Russian-built attack submarines. Indeed, Vietnam is building its naval power efficiently with the help of India, Russia and the US to protect its sovereignty.⁶² In essence, Hanoi’s strategy towards China comprises four components: hard balancing; soft balancing; direct engagement; and economic pragmatism. All these components reflect the fundamental nature of a hedging strategy, which provides Vietnam opportunities to maintain a peaceful, stable and cooperative relationship with China.⁶³

However, at this critical juncture, because of the rapid developments in the South China Sea and with Washington already pulling out from the TPP, it may be more prudent for Southeast Asia to adopt a strategy of enmeshment, and avoid hedging or bandwagoning as it would only lead to suspicion and deficit of trust among ASEAN member countries. Evelyn Goh has argued that Southeast Asia should not only engage with China through bilateral and multilateral organisations or through political and economic means but establish closer relations through political-security dialogues, military exchanges and cooperation. It should also establish good relationships with US and other regional players like Japan, South Korea and India.⁶⁴ However, multilateral organisations like ASEAN and mechanisms like UNCLOS have not been very effective in dealing with conflict management as they have failed to bring China to the negotiation table. For instance, the July 2016 tribunal decision was rejected by China and declared null and void. Another instance occurred in 2014 when, for the first time since 1995, ASEAN issued a statement of serious concern over the crisis between China and Vietnam over the HYSY-981 oil rig near the disputed Paracel Islands.⁶⁵ Yet, this statement had no impact on China’s stand and could not ease the tension of the Sino-Vietnam crisis.

Therefore, Vietnam, which has the largest claims in the South China Sea and is largely dependent on the Chinese economy, needs to focus on achieving its strategic goals through a “mini-lateral” engagement with India and the US, that is, Vietnam–US–India trilateral cooperation. This strategy could help mediate its stake with China and reduce its economic dependency on Beijing. Similarly, India stands to gain through a strategic partnership with Vietnam as the security of the sea lanes in Hanoi’s territorial waters would have a direct impact on Chinese naval incursions into the IOR. Recent reports suggest that China’s economy has been impacted as the US–China trade war has led to the relocation of manufacturing units to countries like Vietnam and Indonesia. This would also be an opportune time for India to offer investments to Vietnam in an

attempt to sway Hanoi's trade imbalance with China. The recent outbreak of the Coronavirus is expected to further slow down the Chinese economy. Hence, there will be an additional reason to engage Vietnam in terms of trade in the near future.

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