

RSIS Commentary is a platform to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy-relevant commentary and analysis of topical issues and contemporary developments. The views of the authors are their own and do not represent the official position of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced electronically or in print with prior permission from RSIS and due recognition to the author(s) and RSIS. Please email: RSISPublications@ntu.edu.sg for feedback to the Editor RSIS Commentary, Yang Razali Kassim.

Singapore - Vietnam Strategic Partnership: New Initiatives Needed

By Le Hong Hiep

Synopsis

The Singapore-Vietnam strategic partnership has strong foundations, but the two countries need to look for bolder and more substantive measures to further deepen their ties. In defence cooperation, anti-piracy joint patrols and bilateral training arrangements are among initiatives to be considered.

Commentary

THE SINGAPORE-VIETNAM Strategic Partnership, which was established during Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's official visit to Vietnam in September 2013, has entered its third year. Bilateral political ties have strengthened over the years, resulting in close cooperation and regular consultation between government ministries and agencies. Meanwhile, strategic cooperation between them, as well as with other ASEAN member states, is helping to shape the evolving regional architecture.

Although the partnership is still in its early stage of development, it has a strong foundation and the potential to become a significant tool for both countries to advance their national interests, especially in terms of defence and strategic cooperation.

Defence cooperation promoted

In 2005, the two countries concluded a Connectivity Framework Agreement which serves as the overarching platform for bilateral economic cooperation. Since then, the Framework has facilitated various important investment projects by Singaporean companies into Vietnam. By June 2015, the accumulative stock of Singapore's direct

investment into Vietnam had reached US\$ 33 billion, making Singapore the third largest foreign investor in the country. Meanwhile, two-way trade has grown at an average rate of more than 12 percent annually, reaching SG\$ 20.4 billion last year. Vietnam is currently Singapore's eleventh largest trade partner.

In addition, the two countries have maintained a high level of mutual trust as high-ranking officials are in close contact. People-to-people exchanges have also been strengthened. There are currently about 8,000 Vietnamese students studying in Singapore and Singapore is a popular destination for Vietnamese tourists.

Recently, defence cooperation has been promoted. For example, the two ministries of defence have been exchanging regular visits by high-ranking officials and conducting annual defence policy dialogues. Other bilateral defence cooperation activities have also expanded, covering training, peace-keeping, anti-piracy, counter-terrorism, and search and rescue.

Such defence and strategic cooperation, however, remains modest. Given the relatively sensitive nature of defence cooperation, fresh ideas should be discussed to facilitate the emergence of new models of cooperation that are acceptable to both sides.

Joint anti-piracy patrols and training exercises

One idea that should be considered is the conduct of joint anti-piracy patrols along the sea lanes of communication (SLOCs) between Singapore and Vietnam. This idea has not been raised before as it was seen as irrelevant or unnecessary. Recently, however, there have been a number of piracy incidents involving merchant ships travelling along these SLOCs.

For example, in December 2014, the VP ASPHALT 2 ship of the Vietnam Petroleum Transport JSC carrying 2,300 tons of liquid asphalt from Singapore to the Go Dau port in Vietnam was attacked by pirates when it was roughly 60 nautical miles off Singapore's coast. In the incident, a Vietnamese crewman was shot dead. Two months earlier, the Vietnamese oil tanker Sunrise 689 was also pirated when it was around 120 nautical miles north-east of Singapore.

These incidents make it necessary for the two countries to consider joint patrols as a measure to enhance maritime security in the region. Such patrols, which should be based on Singapore's experience in conducting joint patrols with Malaysia and Indonesia in the Malacca Strait, may be open to participation by other countries, especially Malaysia and Thailand. If conducted, the patrols will bring benefits to not only ships of the countries involved, but also those carrying other flags travelling through the southern part of the South China Sea.

Another idea worth exploring is enhanced bilateral cooperation in training and joint exercises. Due to Singapore's small size, the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) has concluded training agreements with a number of countries, including Australia, Germany, India, South Africa, and the United States. Through these agreements, Singapore can send its troops overseas for extended periods of training. Vietnam and Singapore can consider concluding a similar agreement. Given its proximity to

Singapore and rich war-fighting experience, Vietnam can be a helpful partner for Singapore in this regard.

Need to deepen ties

In fact, Singapore had previously requested Vietnam for help with training in jungle warfare, but Vietnam did not show interest, probably for fear that such cooperation might upset its relations with neighbouring countries, especially China. However, due to China's recent assertiveness in the South China Sea and Vietnam's wish to deepen its strategic ties with major partners, the proposal may be well-received by Hanoi this time. In any case, a transparent approach to and moderate scope of the initiative will also help assure regional countries of its peaceful and purely technical character.

Given Vietnam's principle of not allowing foreign troops to be stationed on its soil, a bilateral visiting forces agreement should also be concluded to provide the legal basis for such an initiative and highlight the temporary and rotational nature of the arrangement. As far as Vietnam is concerned, such agreements with Singapore, if successful, may serve as a model for the country to deepen its strategic ties with other partners in the future.

In sum, Vietnam and Singapore have been successful in promoting their comprehensive relationship, based on strong economic, political and strategic foundations. Nevertheless, it is important for the two countries to look for new, bolder and more substantive measures to further deepen their ties, especially after their strategic partnership framework was set up two years ago. With strong political will and a future-oriented vision, the two countries will be able to attain more meaningful achievements together not only for their own but also regional interests.

Le Hong Hiep is a visiting fellow at ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore. The views expressed in this article are his own and do not reflect those of the Institute, or any government.
