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THE CHINA FACTOR IN VIETNAM'S VIEW OF INDIA

*In comparisons between India and China, the Vietnamese view India more favourably. Yet, a powerful China wields greater influence. Arguing from the realist prism, **JITENDRA NATH MISRA** avoids the hyperbole of most India-Vietnam scholarship. Strong as the political foundation is, he shows India-Vietnam relations to have structural limitations, notably, weak economic and cultural links, and only modest defence ties. Limited ability to meet Vietnamese expectations relegates India to being a passive partner giving Vietnam first mover advantage.*



Between tiger and dragon: China looms large in Vietnam's view of India. Photo by Mathew Schwartz on Unsplash.

A 2022 [poll](#) by the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute found that 29.9 per cent of Vietnamese believed India would “do the right thing” to contribute to global peace, security, prosperity, and governance, while 31.3 per cent had little or no confidence in India doing so. In contrast, while 24.3 per cent of Vietnamese believed China would do the right thing, a significant 64.6 per cent expressed little or no confidence in China doing

so. A Pew [survey](#) seven years earlier made similar observations. It found that 56 per cent of Vietnamese had confidence that Prime Minister Narendra Modi “would do the right thing regarding world affairs”, while only 20 per cent believed President Xi Jinping would do likewise. Moreover, 66 per cent of Vietnamese viewed India favourably, while only 19 per cent held a favourable view of China.

While the Vietnamese people may hold more positive views of India than they do of China, their views do not necessarily impact the Vietnamese government’s India policy.

Vietnam and India are aligned on the use of the term “Indo-Pacific”, yet have no common Indo-Pacific strategy. India lacks the instruments to help a Vietnam that has faced Chinese pressure historically. The Vietnamese highlight aggressive Chinese actions and pressure in the South China Sea, but express low confidence in India’s capacity to balance China. They warily acknowledge China’s cultural influence on Vietnam as “forceful” and “potent”, while India’s is described as “benign” and “peaceful”.

As a result, Vietnam takes no position on the border stand-off between China and India in Ladakh. My Vietnamese interlocutors conceded that the stand-off had generated serious thinking and high attention. Among researchers I spoke to, there were some who found it concerning and expressed disagreement with Chinese actions, although others would not even discuss it. Any concern there was did not translate into support for India. Thus, if forced to choose between China and India, Vietnam would pursue ambiguity, in effect accommodating China’s power.

Strong Political Foundation but Modest Defence Ties

India’s subdued but steady support for the North Vietnamese regime during its independence struggle was evident right into the 1960s. As Vietnam’s ties with China deteriorated, India was one of the first countries to recognise the new Vietnamese government after reunification in 1976. Since then, Vietnam has intermittently sought stronger security ties with India, transfers of military equipment, and increases in trade.

Following the signing of the Defence Protocol in 2000, the two countries signed a Joint Declaration on Strategic Partnership in 2007. Twelve rounds of political consultations, nine rounds of the Strategic Dialogue, 13 rounds of the Defence Policy Dialogue, two rounds of the Maritime Security Dialogue, and one round of the Policy Planning Dialogue have also been held.

With the launch of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership during Prime Minister Modi’s visit to Vietnam in 2016, ties were upgraded to surer political footing, placing India as one of Vietnam’s most important partners, alongside China and Russia. A joint [statement](#) issued during the visit sought to promote ties in defence and security; trade and investment; energy; connectivity; science and technology; training; people-to-people links; and regional and international cooperation. It placed on record “India’s significant interest in promoting defence industry cooperation.”

Vietnam seeks India’s support to boost its strategic capacity and counter Chinese aggressiveness in the South China Sea. Public pleadings are not uncommon. For

example, at the 2017 Delhi Dialogue Vietnam's deputy prime minister and foreign minister, Pham Binh Minh, [expressed](#) the hope that India would “continue to partner our efforts for strategic security and freedom of navigation in South [sic] China Sea”. Days later, by renewing a licence for the Indian government-owned company ONGC Videsh to explore hydrocarbons in Block 128 of Vietnam’s exclusive economic zone, partly claimed by China, Vietnam sought to draw India into a China-facing partnership.

India has met such requests by providing Vietnam with modest, yet valuable strategic support through [naval exercises](#) and ship [visits](#), training in fighter aircraft and [submarine operations](#), repairs of [fighter jets](#), and supply and manufacture of [naval platforms](#). India, in fact, is one of the few countries with which Vietnam conducts naval exercises. In 2018, an Indian [satellite tracking and imaging centre](#) was activated near Ho Chi Minh City, as part of a space cooperation deal which would give Hanoi [access to India’s satellite images and training in imagery analysis](#).

Under a US\$100 million defence line of credit offered in 2014, India delivered [12 patrol boats](#) to the Vietnam Border Guard Command during Defence Minister Rajnath Singh’s [visit](#) to Hanoi in June 2022. The two sides [signed](#) a Joint Vision Statement on India-Vietnam Defence Partnership towards 2030, intended to “significantly enhance the scope and scale” of defence ties. They also agreed on “early finalisation” of India’s US\$500 million line of credit for defence purchases, ending speculation that Vietnam wanted the credit diverted for purchases of non-military items. In a first for Vietnam, a mutual logistics support agreement was concluded during Singh’s visit.

These steps provide Vietnam some insurance against a China that undermines Vietnamese and Indian interests in the South China Sea. For example, China has [opposed and obstructed](#) ONGC Videsh’s oil exploration in Block 128, claiming it overlaps with China’s self-proclaimed “nine-dash line”. In 2012 India’s then navy chief Admiral D. K. Joshi had said that the Indian Navy was [prepared](#) to deploy in the South China Sea to protect India’s hydrocarbon interests. In 2021 India sent a task force of four naval ships to the South China Sea.

Nevertheless, India takes no stand on Vietnam’s (or others’) territorial claims in the South China Sea. Agreeing to undertake hydrocarbon exploration in parts of the sea claimed by China, no doubt, is implicit recognition of Vietnamese sovereignty over these areas, but the Indian Navy has shown little appetite for deploying in a combat posture, nor even signalled its intent to do so.

Tenuous Cultural Links and Weak Economic Ties

Vietnam and India seem to be exchanging hyperbolic statements about the depth of their cultural links. As I have argued [elsewhere](#), those links are rather tenuous today, mainly serving Vietnam’s “China-wary identity politics”. The Champa heritage being shared history is a useful elite-level link to India, strengthening ties to India as a partner in the preservation of heritage. Some Vietnamese scholars have even told me that Vietnam received Buddhism from India and not China. But the Buddhist link operates more at the philosophical level. Although many Vietnamese consider India their holy land, and some visit Indian Buddhist sites, they are astounded by the minuscule size of India’s Buddhist community.

Similarly, weak economic ties and the inability to deliver on agreed targets for trade dampen the potential for growth in the relationship. [Bilateral trade between India and Vietnam](#) stood at just US\$14.14 billion in the 2021–2022 financial year, 12 times lower than [trade between Vietnam and China](#), which in 2020 amounted to a whopping US\$133 billion. China is, in fact, Vietnam's largest trading partner. Likewise, with investments in 2020 alone totalling US\$2.4 billion (as of November 2020), China was Vietnam's largest [investor](#). India, in contrast, [ranked 25th](#) among investors in Vietnam, with cumulative investments estimated at US\$1.9 billion as of early 2022.

India, in Vietnam's View

Such is the paradox of India-Vietnam relations — a strong political foundation but with structural limitations, notably, weak economic and cultural links and only modest defence ties.

In reality, Vietnam seeks a balance between the United States, China, and Russia, with India as a lesser pole, to ease its economic dependence on China and secure modest strategic support. India's core concerns like border disputes with China and Pakistan, Kashmir, and Pakistan-sponsored terrorism are not Vietnam's immediate concerns. Despite bipartisan consensus in India on Vietnam's importance, India, too, struggles to meet Vietnamese expectations.

Currently, Vietnam enjoys first mover advantage in this relationship. As a growing Indo-Pacific power, India must meet Vietnamese concerns — so goes Vietnamese thinking. In this reckoning, India should, without reciprocal obligations, lend Vietnam strategic support because it *can*. Limited ability to meet Vietnamese expectations, however, relegates India to a passive partner which responds, but rarely takes the initiative.

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