Is Vietnam-U.S heading for a Strategic Partnership?

Gitanjali Sinha Roy

Abstract

The relations between the United States of America and Vietnam have been reinvigorated in the recent years and this has led to a change in dynamics reaching an extraordinary level of mutual trust and exchange. The turbulent past between the two countries has left an undeniable scar of the war. The primary reason for the change in relations is due to the rise of an aggressive China especially in the South China Sea. The U.S., its allies and friends bothered by Chinese aggressiveness have brought the U.S. and Vietnam together making China a common bone of contention. US President Donald John Trump has made engagement in the Indo-Pacific region a top priority. In November 2017 on his visit to Vietnam, President Trump outlined his vision of a free and open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) where all the countries would prosper side by side respecting the sovereignty and independence of one another. In this context, the article traces the new changes in the dynamics between the U.S. and Vietnam which in all possibility could lead to a strategic partnership between the two. Furthermore, it would lead to the formation of a ‘United States-led coalition with the Quad countries and Vietnam Axis’ in the Indo-Pacific region.

Key words: US-Vietnam strategic relations, Free and Open Indo-Pacific, Chinese Aggression, Maritime convergences, South China Sea, Quad, Quad+ Vietnam Axis.

First Phase of Changing Dynamics: Diplomatic and Economic ties

The relations between the United States of America and Vietnam for years remained turbulent and the initial years of the revamping of the relations between the two countries took a series of efforts and prolonged patience and hard work. After the war, the primary focus of the U.S. was to obtain all possible U.S. personnel listed as Prisoners of War (POW) and Missing in Action (MIAs). In 1991, Vietnam agreed to host a U.S. office in Hanoi to work towards the POW/MIA affairs. The United States in 1992 removed restrictions which they had earlier placed on the American non-governmental organisations working in Vietnam and further withdrew their opposition to lending from international financial institutions in 1993. The U.S. trade embargo against Vietnam was lifted in February 1994 and with this started the several high-level U.S.
interactions with Vietnam with the focal point remaining the POW/MIA cases. All these initial efforts led to political normalisation which paved the way for diplomatic relations in July 1995, under the leadership of President Bill Clinton. This marked the first phase of reinvigorating the relations between the two countries.

With the diplomatic relations in place, economic normalisation was next in line. This was preceded by a blueprint for a draft trade agreement presented to Vietnam by the U.S. in May 1996. This was followed by the visit of the U.S. National Security Adviser, Anthony Lake to Hanoi to mark the first anniversary of the normalisation of the relations between the two countries. On 7 April 1997, the U.S. Treasury Secretary Robert Rubin and Finance Minister Nguyen Sinh Hung signed an accord in Hanoi for Vietnam to repay the debts of USD145 million from the former government of South Vietnam. On 10 April 1997, Douglas Pete Peterson, a Vietnam War Veteran and former POW was confirmed as Ambassador to Vietnam. Soon, Le Van Bang presented his credentials as Ambassador of Vietnam in Washington, D.C on 9 May 1997. Secretary of State Madeline Albright arrived in Vietnam for an official visit and signed a Copyright Agreement with Vietnam on 27 June 1997. The U.S. Government passed the special legislation in August 1997 permitting the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) to assist Vietnam so that it could improve trade through a Commercial Law and Trade Policy Technical program. On 11 March 1998, President William J. Clinton issued waivers of Jackson-Vanik Amendment for Vietnam which paved a way for OPIC, Ex-Im, TDA, USDA and MARAD activities. Later, on 26 March 1998, the Minister of Planning and Investment Tran Xuan Gia and Ambassador Pete Peterson finalised the signing of the OPIC Bilateral Agreement. All these endeavours led to the formation of a Bilateral Trade Agreement in principle in Hanoi, Vietnam on 25 July 1999 between the USTR Ambassador Richard Fisher and Vietnam Trade Minister Tuyen. This was followed by the U.S.-Asia Environmental Partnership (U.S.-AEP) which established Technology Representative Offices in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. The Consulate General in Ho Chi Minh City was officially open for business in August 1999 and by September 1999; USAID began a technical program to the Ministry of Trade so that there could be an acceleration of negotiations in the Bilateral Trade Agreement. On 13 July 2000, the Bilateral Trade Agreement was signed by Vietnam Trade Minister Vu Khoan and USTR Ambassador Barshefsky, with US President William J. Clinton announcing the Agreement at a White House Rose Garden ceremony. This was followed by a visit of President Clinton to Vietnam on November 16-20, 2000 along with a business delegation and the leadership of the Veterans of Foreign Wars.

All these achievements were important but the highlight was in the year of 2001 when on September 27, 2001, USAID launched the Support for Trade Acceleration (STAR-Vietnam) project so that it could support Vietnam for the implementation of the Bilateral Trade Agreement (BTA). On 16 October 2001, President George W. Bush signed

the Bilateral Trade Agreement (BTA) into Public Law No: 107-52. This was followed by the signing of the Vietnam Bilateral Trade Agreement in Washington, D.C. by the USTR Ambassador Robert Zoellick and Deputy Prime Minister Dung and Trade Minister Vu Khuon. These developments through the Bilateral Trade Agreement were major victories for both sides as the formalisation of the trade relations changed the dynamics of the relationship between the two nations in 2001.

The United States and Vietnam had fought a war and it was rather impossible to think of any defence exchanges between these two nations but on 10 November 2003, Defence Minister Pham Van Tra visited the U.S to discuss the cooperation for the promotion of regional security. In November 2003, the Navy missile frigate USS Vandegrift docked in Ho Chi Minh City. This was the first U.S. Navy ship to dock in Vietnam since the end of the brutal war, a symbolic act of boosting stronger relations which was followed by the signing of the Bilateral Aviation Agreement dated December 4, 2003. Admiral Thomas Fargo, Commander of the U.S. Pacific Command paid a two-day visit on February 10-11, 2004 to Vietnam, making stopovers at Hanoi and Da Nang. February 26, 2004 saw the opening of the First American Corner in Da Nang. On 28 July 2004, the USS Curtis Wilbur DDG-54 arrived in Da Nang becoming the second U.S. Navy ship to visit Vietnam, since 1975.

The year of 2005 marked the 10th anniversary celebrations of the normalisation of diplomatic relations between the United States and Vietnam. As a gesture commemorating the 10th anniversary, the USS Gary arrived in the port of HCMC on 29 March 2005. Prime Minister of Vietnam, Phan Van Khai also paid a visit to President George W. Bush on June 19 to 24, 2005. This was a major change in the relations as for the first time a Vietnamese Prime Minister visited the U.S. in the post-War era. During this visit the two countries signed an Economic and Technical Cooperation Agreement and others dealing with international adoptions, intelligence and military cooperation. Vietnam also signed an agreement which was a prerequisite for participating in the United States’ International Military Education and Training (IMET) program. Therefore, this was a major message that even past enemies can cultivate ties and aim for stronger relations as partnership between the two countries moved to comprehensive partnership.

Eric G. John, the Deputy Assistant Secretary in his statement on 12 July 2006 before the Senate Finance Committee on Vietnam spoke about the Permanent Normal Trade Relations (PNTR) for Vietnam and quoted that there are critical economic and commercial reasons that the PNTR status for Vietnam and its accession to World Trade Organisation (WTO) would be good for both Vietnam and the US. He further quoted that there was a five-fold rise in trade of $7.8 billion in 2005 and this also included the US companies’ overseas subsidiaries who were the largest investors in Vietnam in 2005 and in 2006, seeing the economic growth of Vietnam. Intel announced its plans to invest over USD 300 million in new microchip facilities in the Ho Chi Minh City area.

---

7 Ibid.
Therefore, these were developments since the signing of the Bilateral Trade Agreement (BTA) in 2001. Eric G. John in his speech also highlighted that economic and regulatory reforms launched under the BTA were assisted by an innovative US trade capacity building program known as Support for Trade Acceleration (STAR) which expanded under the WTO accession process. Also, as Vietnam amended its commercial legislations in accordance with WTO rules and regulations, there was improved governance by increasing transparency in the decision making by the state and curtailment in the privileges of state-owned enterprises.\(^9\)

With several profound structural changes in the Vietnamese economy, opportunities for the US firms and investors increased by leaps and bounds, carving out a new beginning between the U.S. and Vietnam. On 11 January 2007, Vietnam became the 150\(^{th}\) Member of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) which was a greater win for the relations between the U.S. and Vietnam as the U.S. was instrumental in pushing for the membership of Vietnam. On January 22-23, 2007, Admiral Gary Roughhead Commander of the U.S. Pacific Fleet visited Vietnam for two days and met the Vice Admiral Nguyen Van Hien, the Commander of the Vietnamese Navy. Later the Deputy Prime Minister Pham Gia Kiem visited the U.S. between 11 to 16 March, 2007 and on 15 March 2007, the U.S-Vietnam Bilateral Maritime Agreement was signed in Washington D.C. The signing of the Trade and Investment Framework Agreement (TIFA) followed on 21 June 2007. From June 18-23, 2007 President Nguyen Minh Triet visited the United States to deepen cooperation in the sectors of economics and trade. The psychological impact of the war was felt on both sides but despite that the effort to work to normalise the relations between them and work for successful diplomatic as well as economic ties was a major step towards the future.

**Second Phase: Security and Maritime Cooperation in the South China Sea**

A U.S. inter-agency delegation was led by the Deputy Secretary of the State James Steinberg to Hanoi from September 26-27, 2009. The delegation held productive discussions with Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung, Deputy Prime Minister Hoang Trung Hai and Deputy Prime Minister Nguyen Thien Nhan aiming to strengthen the bilateral relations. Several regional as well as global security issues such as the South China Sea and the nuclear programs of countries like North Korea and Iran were also discussed. These discussions paved the way for optimistic cooperation between the U.S. and Vietnam. In fact, 2009 saw a major highlight in the military ties between the two countries when two US naval ships, USS Blue Ridge and the USS Lassen, docked at Da Nang port on 7 November 2009. This marked a goodwill gesture as for the first time two U.S. Navy ships visited Da Nang concurrently. Also, the Admiral of USS Lassen, Le Ba Hung was born in Hue City and grew up in Northern Virginia, becoming the first Vietnamese-American to command a U.S. naval ship.\(^{10}\) The U.S.-Vietnam security cooperation advanced rapidly, fuelled by the convergence of the two countries’ strategic

---


interests in the South China Sea and this could be seen as the second phase of the relationship.

Vietnam's prudent stance had changed towards the security cooperation with the U.S. with regard to the South China Sea’s regional emergence as initially in the early 2000’s, the disputes over territorial rights of islands and waters in the SCS had subsided for a while but it resurfaced in 2009 as the Vietnamese fishing boats operation resumed in the Paracel Islands which were seized by the patrol vessels of China's maritime law enforcement agencies by the end of 2009, about 100 Vietnamese fishermen were detained by Chinese authorities and 50 were detained in the first half of 2010 and this led to the aggravating of the situation. Chinese government was reported to have said that it considers the South China Sea as one of its “core interests,” which further heightened Vietnam’s sense of wariness.11

In 2009, President Obama was the first American leader to have ever attended a meeting with all the ten ASEAN leaders and became a party to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia which was an anchor diplomatic document of ASEAN and this opened the door to the East Asia Summit for the United States. On 15 November 2009, the 1st ASEAN-U.S. Leaders’ Meeting in Singapore was held with the theme as “Enhanced Partnership for Enduring Peace and Prosperity” and worked on the “ASEAN-U.S. Enhanced Partnership 2009”. This was followed by making America the first non-ASEAN country to establish a dedicated Mission to ASEAN in Jakarta in 2010 and its ASEAN Development Vision to Advance National Cooperation and Economic Integration (ADVANCE) program. ASEAN also noted and welcomed the intention of the United States in the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting-Plus (ADMM-Plus) and welcomed the intention of the U.S. Secretary of Defence to undertake consultations with his ASEAN counterparts concerning the ADMM-Plus.12 On 14 November 2009 in Tokyo, Japan, President Obama announced his decision that the U.S would be engaging with the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and quoted “The United States will also be engaging with the Trans-Pacific Partnership countries with the goal of shaping a regional agreement that will have broad-based membership and the high standards worthy of a 21st century trade agreement” and by 5 October 2010, Malaysia joined Australia, Brunei, Chile, New Zealand, Peru, Singapore, the United States and Vietnam as a party to the TPP negotiations.13

The U.S. was represented by Hillary Clinton, the Secretary of State who attended the fifth East Asia Summit for the first time in October 2010 and launched the “Lower Mekong Initiative”, the first-of-its-kind agreement between countries like Cambodia,

Laos, Thailand, Vietnam and the U.S. and together aimed to enhance cooperation in the sectors of water, forest management, education and health.\(^\text{14}\) Hillary Clinton said “The United States is back in Southeast Asia... and we are fully engaged with our... partners on the wide range of challenges confronting us”.\(^\text{15}\) America being accepted by all the ASEAN nations would mean a major change in the policy and with this, America was now an accepted power in Asia. ASEAN has always been seen as a balanced regional entity and they accepted the U.S. mention that the U.S. was now seen as a friend and these efforts from either ends was like a breath of fresh air especially keeping in mind the historical factors and the China factor in mind.

In December 2009, the Assistant Secretary level Defence Policy Dialogue was formally established and this was done when General Phung Quang Thanh, the Defence Minister of Vietnam visited the U.S. On August 8, 2010, the U.S Navy’s nuclear-powered aircraft carrier, USS George Washington arrived off the coast of Da Nang, in central Vietnam. Many military and government interactions between the two countries also took place such as a joint navy search and rescue training program. Aegis destroyer USS John S McCain made a port call in Danang anchoring off Southern Vietnam in August 2011 and October 2012. Both navies conducted non-traditional security joint exercises regularly since 2010. Later on, 17 August, 2010 the first dialogue between the Deputy Minister of Defence Lieutenant General Nguyen Chi Vinh and the U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defence Robert Scher was held in Hanoi. The meeting focused on the future of bilateral cooperation and worked on regional and international issues, resolving MIA issues and exchanges between the military students in the US and Hanoi.\(^\text{16}\) The Cam Ranh Bay emerged as a strategic point from the perspective of maritime defence. In October 2010, Prime Minister Nguyễn Tấn Dũng declared the port open to foreign navies and also provided logistic support services for vessels, with the U.S. being their first customer. From August 2011, dry cargo ship USNS Richard Byrd, the U.S. Navy contracted for maintenance and repair services for logistics support ships in Cam Ranh Bay almost every year.\(^\text{17}\)

On 19 September 2011, the second Vietnam-U.S. Defence Policy Dialogue was held in Washington D.C. and was co-chaired by Vietnamese Deputy Defence Minister Lieutenant General Nguyen Chi Vinh and U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defence Robert Scher. Both agreed to enhance defence cooperation at the regional as well as at the international level. The two representatives signed a Memorandum of


Understanding for advancing bilateral defence cooperation in five key sectors of maritime security, a commitment to continue high-level dialogues, cooperation on search and rescue operations, cooperation on humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, and cooperation on peacekeeping operations.\textsuperscript{18}

The highlight was President Obama’s speech in the Australian Parliament on 17 November 2011 and he mentioned in his speech about America’s enhanced presence in the Southeast Asian nations with their relations with Indonesia against piracy and violent extremism, Malaysia’s work to prevent proliferation, deploying ships in Singapore, closer cooperation Vietnam and Cambodia and India’s ‘look east’ and together play a greater role in the Asian power balance and address the challenges of proliferation and maritime security especially cooperating in the South China Sea.\textsuperscript{19} By mentioning the South China Sea, it was clear that China was being indirectly being mentioned especially for its maritime aggressiveness and this was another reason why the relations with the ASEAN nations and the U.S. kept growing and becoming closer aiming for greater cooperation.

In June 2012, in a historic visit of the U.S. Secretary of Defence Leon Panetta to Cam Ranh, Vietnam, Secretary Panetta commented, “Today I stand on a U.S. ship here in Cam Ranh Bay to recognize the 17\textsuperscript{th} anniversary of the normalization of relations between the United States and Vietnam. . . . We have a complicated relationship but we’re not bound by that history . . . it is very important that we be able to protect key maritime rights for all nations in the South China Sea and elsewhere”.\textsuperscript{20} All these heightened activities by the U.S. made one thing extremely clear that the U.S. was going after China and it needed a partner in Southeast Asia and Vietnam was emerging as a vital partner.

“The Vietnam-U.S. Comprehensive Partnership, established in 2013, could be seen as a great move in the relations between the two countries. The progress of relations originated from traditional and shared interests in the Asia-Pacific, where the U.S. had strategies such as ‘pivot to Asia’ and ‘Indo-Pacific’ to ‘defend regional stability’ among others”.\textsuperscript{21} In July 2013, President Obama and President Sang together launched the U.S-Vietnam Comprehensive Partnership. Secretary of State John Kerry announced commitment in maritime capacity building, economic engagement, issues of climate


change and environment, education cooperation, respect for human rights and civil nuclear cooperation. USD 32.5 million was announced as an initial commitment as a part of the new regional and bilateral assistance to expand the maritime capacity building in the region of Southeast Asia. Additionally, USD 18 million was given to Vietnam as new assistance, to enhance the capacity of coastal patrol units to deploy rapidly for search and rescue, disaster response and training along with provision of five fast patrol vessels to the Vietnamese Coast Guard. A USD 500 million MoU was signed between the Export-Import Bank of the United States and the Vietnam Development Bank. The first U.S-Vietnam private sector agreement under the U.S-Asia Pacific Comprehensive Energy Partnership and the first renewable energy project was all financed as part of the MoU. GE Aviation signed a deal to provide USD 1.7 billion in engines and servicing for Vietnam Airlines’ Boeing 787 aircrafts. All these commercial deals crossed over 50-fold in the last 20 years reaching USD 25 billion which build a strong bilateral trade relationship. USD 4.2 million were announced for USAID’s “Governance for Inclusive Growth” assistance program aimed to facilitate broad-based sustainable growth. USD 17 million for the USAID’s “Vietnam Forests and Deltas” Program was announced in four provinces along with the Long Island in the Mekong Delta. The Lower Mekong Initiative and the Smart Infrastructure for the Mekong program were established and it would help countries with the best science to make decisions on infrastructure. Both the countries initiated the Civil Nuclear Cooperation and then awarded a contract for an environmental assessment of dioxin contamination at Bien Hoa Air Base and then a MoU was signed on the continued unexploded ordnance cooperation. The relations between the U.S-Vietnam in this phase grew to newer heights of maritime security and Hanoi worked on greater cooperation on security aspects with America as the partners knew that the China threat was soon going to become an even bigger reason for their cooperation and so, this phase also brought in a major change in dynamics of their relations.

**Third Phase of Changing Dynamics: Heightened Chinese Aggression**

In May 2014, China National Offshore Oil Corporation deployed a mobile oil rig, HYSY-981, inside the exclusive economic zone of Vietnam and after several weeks of tensions between the two countries, China eventually withdrew from the region. This incident paved the way for Vietnam to look for external partners to balance China and preserve its own interests. With US interests also being under threat from the rising Chinese belligerence in the South China Sea, the U.S. emerged as a natural partner for Vietnam. In 2015, the United States and Vietnam marked the 20th anniversary of diplomatic relations. The 2015 Joint Vision Statement on Defence Relations reaffirmed and expanded defence cooperation and highlighted mutual trust, enhancement of military capabilities, the expansion of collaboration in maritime security and cooperation in

---


promoting security and stability in the Asia-Pacific region. Additionally, the Defence Policy Dialogues that are held periodically, are considered to be primary mechanisms to increase shared understanding between both countries and provide practical guidance to the U.S.-Vietnam defence relationship.\textsuperscript{24} From 5-10 July 2015, the General Secretary of the Communist Party of Vietnam Nguyen Phu Trong visited Washington D.C. and met US President Obama. The two leaders discussed the 20 years of diplomatic ties between the two nations and also addressed growth in economic and trade cooperation, science and technology, education, healthcare, environment and climate change, defence security and ultimately working on regional and international cooperation for the prosperity of the Asia-Pacific region. They also discussed ASEAN’s central role in the region as well as the security architecture. Both the countries voiced their concerns about the developments in the East Sea recognising each other's internationally recognised freedom of navigation and overflight and supported the peaceful solution of disputes in conformity with international law especially with the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), 1982. Both the states also recognised the importance of fully implementing the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the East Sea and efforts to conclude the Code of Conduct of Parties in the East Sea.\textsuperscript{25}

In May 2015, China’s Navy issued eight warnings to the crew of a U.S P8A Poseidon when it flew directly to the artificial island and in response to this, the American pilots’ responded saying they were flying over international airspace and a Chinese radio operator said in complete exasperation “This is Chinese Navy…..You go!”\textsuperscript{26} On October 2015, the U.S. sent the destroyer USS Lassen and it conducted a transit within the twelve nautical miles of Subi Reef in the Spratly Islands. Further, the U.S. sent surveillance planes and war ships to contested waters as they have concerns over Chinese activities in those waters of the South China Sea (SCS) and it then that the U.S, surveillance imagery showed China’s weaponry on the artificial islands which had been built for military purposes and was a hindrance to the freedom of navigation and also, the U.S. doesn’t accept the air and sea patrols that pass directly above or very the artificial islands and doesn’t accept China’s claim over the disputed waters.\textsuperscript{27}

In March 2016, Vietnam opened its third international port in the Cam Ranh Bay and began to accept foreign naval vessels. In April 2016, the U.S. Department of Defence commenced the Maritime Security Initiative (MSI). Under the initiative, a program was designed to support the improvements in the sectors of intelligence, surveillance,

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{24} \url{https://apps.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/1020336.pdf} (Accessed on 11 June 2020)
  \item \textsuperscript{26} David Brunnstrom.2015. “U.S., China Rift Grows over Sea Provocations,” The World Post dated May 21, 2015. \url{http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/05/21/us-china-sea_n_7417478.html}. (Accessed on 11 June 2020)
\end{itemize}
reconnaissance (ISR) and MDA capabilities of Malaysia, the Philippines and Vietnam. Also as part of the MSI, the U.S decided to give USD 2 million for Vietnam’s maritime patrol aircraft and vessel modernisation; building of search and rescue command, control, communications systems and training. In the month of May 2016, the U.S. lifted their ban on the sale of lethal weapons to Vietnam and continued to provide maritime security assistance like Maritime Security Initiative, the Cooperative Threat Reduction program and Foreign Military Financing to Vietnam. The Peace Corps was signed between both the countries in 2016 as well. In October 2016, two combat vessels of the U.S Navy made their first port call at the port. In Hague, July 2016, a major development took place in the SCS dispute, post- HYSY-981 incident had taken place due to the ruling of the arbitral tribunal and got the Philippines against China due to Chinese aggressiveness in the SCS and the court ruling showed that China’s artificial islands had no legal status and the exclusive economic zone of the 12 nautical miles couldn’t be applied. Vietnam was one of the seven countries like the Philippines, Australia, Canada, Japan, New Zealand and the United States that openly welcomed the ruling. Other ASEAN nations however, were rather cautious and wary of Chinese reaction to them. With this, Vietnam emerged as the main protagonist in the region of Southeast Asia for the issue on the South China Sea.

US Hamilton ship was received in Vietnam in 2017 and also transfer the Hamilton-class Coast Guard cutter to improve Vietnam’s law enforcement capabilities. The two countries established a working group for Cooperative Humanitarian and Medical Storage Initiative to be used for humanitarian assistance and disaster relief. Both sides also established bilateral dialogue mechanisms. People-to-People ties between Vietnam and the US flourished as 30,000 Vietnamese went to the U.S to study, a new Fulbright University in Vietnam was set up and 21,000 Vietnamese were members of the Young Southeast Asia Leaders Initiative. In August 2017, the Deputy Defence Minister Nguyen Chi Vinh visited the U.S. and attended the Defence Policy Dialogue in October 2017.

The highlight in the relations between the U.S and Vietnam was in 2017 when President Donald John Trump announced America’s vision for a Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) at the APEC Summit in Vietnam. FOIP aimed at the commitment of a safe, secure, prosperous and free Indo-Pacific region. This announcement made in Vietnam was a game-changer as Vietnam has a major importance in the U.S. FOIP strategy. Secondly, the Indo-Pacific construct continues to gain traction as more nations try to determine their own course of action keeping their future needs in mind. This is also important for the U.S as it looks for partners while pursuing its 'America first policy'. With the US wants smaller countries to be active members in the region, tackling Chinese aggressiveness, Vietnam has emerged as a strong alternative, with the largest

---


standing army in Southeast Asia. Also, both the countries share common interest in promoting a rules-based order which could be hindered due to China and so there is a need to work together and protect one another’s territorial sovereignty as Chinese militarization of islands in the South China Sea is soon becoming a major threat and is also directly changing the Indo-Pacific strategic construct.

**Fourth Phase of Changing Dynamics: Indo-Pacific, the strategic conjecture**

According to the 2019 U.S. Department of Defence, Indo-Pacific Strategy Report (IPRS), Indo-Pacific is their priority theatre as China has been trying to reorder the region to its benefit by leveraging military modernisation, influencing operations, pursuing predatory economics to coerce other nations and threatening the rules-based international order. This was a clear indication that the U.S is ready to tackle China. In 2019, the Defence White Paper of Vietnam mentioned “the new developments in the East Sea like the unilateral actions, power-based coercion, violation of international law, militarization, change in the status quo, and infringement upon Vietnam’s sovereignty, sovereign rights, and jurisdiction as provided in international law have undermined the interests of nations concerned and threatened peace, stability, security, safety, and freedom of navigation and overflight in the region”. Although this statement did not mention any particular nation, it was a direct hit at China due to its tensions in the South China Sea, militarisation of islands, detention of Vietnamese fishing men and then ramming and knowingly sinking the Vietnamese fishermen boats by China

America finds Hanoi extremely supportive among all the other Southeast Asian nations. One of the reasons is Vietnam has a big standing Army and is one of the most courageous ASEAN nations. The Cam Ranh Bay is seen as the ‘Apple of the Eye of the East’ due to its strategic importance in dealing with China’s maritime aggressiveness. As Vietnam has a weak navy the U.S has been working actively on its maritime relations with Vietnam to make them a stronger maritime power to tackle China. According to the National Defence Strategy, the U.S has been prioritising its relations with Vietnam by improving its defence capabilities with the ScanEagle Unmanned Aerial Vehicles, T-6 trainer aircraft, a former U.S. Coast Guard high-endurance cutter, small patrol boats and associated training and maintenance of facilities. They have also worked on numerous training exchanges and activities to enhance bilateral cooperation along with interoperability with the Vietnam People’s Army, Air Force, Navy and Coast Guard. USAID’s new trade facilitation program built in Vietnam’s customs department to comply with the global trade norms has helped in reducing the time and cost of trade.

---


A Development Plan was deduced to attract investment and executed workshops in Vietnam with best transportation planning, financing and maintenance and all of this aimed to improve the infrastructure procurement transparency across the region of Indo-Pacific. In September 2019, the U.S launched a new Transaction Advisory Fund (TAF) under ITAN. The National Defence Authorisation Act (NDAA) was enacted in 2016 to work with partners’ maritime capacity, extending it till 2025. The Act expanded the scope of initiative now designated as the Indo-Pacific Maritime Security Initiative (MSI). MSI authorizes the provision of training, equipment, supplies and small-scale construction to Vietnam and other countries to work for maritime security, create a common regional maritime picture and observe and control more effectively in maritime spaces. All these efforts are being made in order to deal with Chinese aggressiveness. The highlight was the visit of the USS Theodore Roosevelt (CVN-71), a nuclear-powered aircraft docked into Tien Sa Port, Danang along with Bunker Hill, a highly sophisticated US navy cruiser from March 5-8, 2020. It was believed that it would send a message to Chinese aggression taking place in the region in recent months, with this gesture not being liked by China as it carried advanced weaponry. Therefore, one thing is pretty clear that the new leadership in Vietnam isn't pro-China and on the contrary is ready to tackle China and the U.S. is the best suited partner it has.

Conclusion

The relations between Vietnam and the U.S. face several issues of human rights, tariff duties have increased and the battle for catfish and shrimp prices still remain unsolved. China’s aggressiveness in the South China Sea is the major point of convergence. Together US and Vietnam can form a ‘U.S. led coalition with Quad countries and Vietnam Axis in the Indo-Pacific region’. Vietnam is the ASEAN chair for the year 2020 and 2021. This coincides with its non-permanent tenure at the UN Security Council during 2020-2021. 2020 also marks the 25th anniversary of the normalization of the U.S.-Vietnam relations. Therefore, it can be said that from all the above-mentioned arguments accompanied with the present situation, the relations between Vietnam and the U.S. can for sure lead to strategic partnership which would inevitably shape the future course of the Indo-Pacific and cater to the shaping of the regional order.

34 Ibid.