



India-Vietnam and the Quest for a Quadrilateral Partnership

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Abstract: In the context of the geo-strategic and economic importance of the Indian Ocean and the Pacific, a new geopolitical construct of ‘Indo-Pacific’ has emerged and this terminology has proliferated the academic literature and dossiers of defense strategists and policy makers world over. This Paper outlines the quest for a quadrilateral partnership in the Indo-Pacific region as a tool for the understanding geopolitics of the twenty-first century. Amidst the complementarities and contradictions—emerging out of the Big Powers, the Paper offers a multilateral approach to the emerging rivalry in the Indo-Pacific. Finally, it argues that the growing competition and clash of interest of the global and regional powers would increase the geo-strategic significance of this region in the years to come.

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1. The Concept

Emerging geopolitical realities and the power shift in the region has impacted the regional architecture in a big way. A review of the literature, which has proliferated manifold in recent years focuses on the need for defining the region—both in the geographic and geopolitical context.

Indo-Pacific for a long time has been used as an area defining the bio-geographic region. In 1948, the Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO) set up the Indo-Pacific Fisheries Council in the Philippines. Noted Geographer, George B. Creasy also uses it in a geographical context in his book, “Asia’s Land and People” (1963). He has suggested that the region is called as ‘Indo-Pacific’ since it lies between two oceans and culture (Sardesai, 1981).

Nonetheless, its use in a geopolitical context is not very old. Karl Haushofer, a German Geographer understood the geopolitical potential of the Indo-pacific in the 1930s (Sardesai, 1981). According to him, “the region contains the two greatest concentrations of mankind ever witnessed in the history of the world.....Those countries are beginning to rise and stir” (Haushofer,1939). He calls Indo-Pacific as ‘Asiatic Monsoon Countries’, since they have a “uniform climate rhythm” of the monsoon, “extending from the mouth of the Indus to that of the Amur and taking in the littoral of Southeast Asia as well as the divides of the large central highland of Asia” (Bhatia & Sakhuja, 2014).

Alfred Thayer Mahan, a famous naval historian way back in 1890 predicted about the primacy of the sea power in India and the Pacific Ocean. According to him,

“whoever controls the Indian Ocean will dominate Asia.....In the twenty-first century, the destiny of the world would be decided on its water” (Bhatia & Sakhuja, 2014). Robert Kaplan regards, “the Indian Ocean comprising of the India, Chinese, Arabs and Persian trading arrangements creating a grand network of cross-ocean communal ties, brought even closer over the centuries by the monsoon wind..... “This Ocean is once again at the heart of the world, just as it was in the antique and medieval times (Kaplan, 2011).

The Indo-Pacific region could also be viewed as a ‘spatial concept’. According to former External Affairs Minister, Salman Khurshid, “Oceans neither begin nor end at any particular point, they connect and interact with each other creating numerous possibilities and opening new horizons....in this region, the strengths and complementarities of the Indian Ocean and the Pacific are in full play” (Bhatia & Sakhuja, 2014). Mohan Malik writes “Current geo-strategic, economic, energy and demographic trends indicate that the Indian and the Pacific Oceans could well emerge as the strategic center of the twenty-first century, much as the Atlantic and the Pacific oceans played this role in the twentieth century” (Malik, 2014). As a geopolitical construct, the Indian Ocean has emerged as a focus of great power rivalry owing to its geopolitical dynamics and the rise of India and China in the region. Rory Medcalf views “quintessential Indo-Pacific power in this region will be China and indispensable will be the United States.... And the big powers’ interactions

with some of the countries literally in the middle—notably Indonesia, Australia and Singapore, but also, for instance, Burma—will influence whether strategic differences can be reasonably controlled” (Medcalf, 2013). This power shift in the Indo-Pacific has been particularly, embodied by the United States rebalancing in the region.

To quote,

“We are now at a point at which the ‘*Confluence of the Two Seas*’ is coming into being. The Pacific and the Indian Oceans are now bringing about a dynamic coupling as seas of freedom and of prosperity. A “broader Asia” that broke away geographical boundaries is now beginning to take on a distinct form”.

Speech by H.E.Mr. Shinzo Abe, Prime Minister of Japan at the Parliament of India, August 22, 2007 (Hayao, 2014).

“We understand how important the Indo-Pacific basin is to global trade and commerce”.

Remarks by *Hillary Clinton*, US Secretary of State on America's Engagement in the Asia-Pacific, October 28, 2010 (Varadarajan, 2007).

“I feel, our future is inter-linked and a stable, secure and prosperous Indo-Pacific region is crucial for our own progress and prosperity”.

Speech by Dr. Manmohan Singh, at Plenary Session of India-ASEAN Commemorative Summit, December 20, 2012 (Chapman, 2017).

“A new Indo-Pacific strategic arc is connecting the Indian and the Pacific Oceans through Southeast Asia”.

Australian Defense White Paper, 2013 (Chapman, 2017).

The Indo-Pacific is a natural region. Inclusiveness, openness and ASEAN centrality and unity, therefore, lie at the heart of the new Indo-Pacific. India's own engagement in the Indo-Pacific Region – from the shores of Africa to that of the Americas - will be inclusive.

--Keynote Address by Narendra Modi, Prime Minister of India at Sangrila Dialogue, Singapore, June 1, 2018 (Varadarajan, 2007).

2. Quadrilateral Partnership in the Indo-Pacific

Given the changing architecture of the world order from the Euro-Atlantic to the Asia-Pacific, the proposed quadrilateral partnership amongst the member-states have much to offer in terms of a rule-based order and safeguard against traditional and non-traditional security issues (Indian Express, 2016). Coming together of countries like India, Japan, Australia, and the United States will be a force for counterbalancing and unrestrained ambitions of the assertive rise of China and its military modernization programme in the region. China's economic rise has also created instability and regional anxiety.

In response to such a hegemonic attempt at maneuvering over the region, an informal official level talk, leading to a security dialogue between the four partners in the Indo-pacific – Australia, India, Japan, and

the United States - has emerged at the regional level. The given objectives include free trade, better connectivity, and increased security. This informal security dialogue was conceptualized in 2007 during the sidelines of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) meeting on May 24-25 in Manila (Varadarajan, 2007). A few months after that Malabar exercise also took place between the four countries in September 2007 (Varadarajan, 2007). These countries participated in joint naval exercises with Singapore much against Chinese apprehensions. Later Australia opted out of it because of its changed political dynamics and economic overdependence on China. With the changed political leadership in Japan, the enthusiasm faded out before the “Quad” could even take a leap forward (Menon, 2017).

After the initiation of the concept in 2007 by Japan, the first quadrilateral meeting centered around the theme ‘free and open Indo-Pacific’ was held in November 2017 at Manila (Panda, 2017). The fact that this meeting was convened in 2007 in the sidelines of ARF and now at ASEAN Summit, “hopes to send the message that the new Quadilateral ties see itself essentially as an adjunct to ASEAN” (Varadarajan, 2007). Containing China amidst its economic diplomacy and military modernization appears to be the obvious reason leading to this security dialogue in the Indo-Pacific region. Needless to say, some strategic experts have also argued that “Its Xi Jinping, not Shinzo Abe who has catalyzed the need for Quad and led to its resurrection. This has been particularly because of China's unilateralism in the region and its threat to global rules of behavior” (Sinha, 2017).

3. Vietnam and the Emerging Quadrilateral Partnership

Given the evolving regional architecture in the Indo-Pacific, the role of Vietnam in the emerging Quadrilateral Partnership in the region becomes significant. As Vietnam faces mounting pressure from China amidst its growing assertiveness in the disputed waters of its East Sea, it is looking to multiple partners in Asia and beyond. Vietnam has reached out to the United States and stepped up security cooperation with Japan, Australia and a number of its Southeast Asian neighbors (Mohan, 2015a).

3.1. Vietnam and the United States

The visit of the Prime Minister of Vietnam Nguyen Xuan Phuc to White House in May 2017 has set an ambitious agenda for Vietnam-US relations. Meeting of both the leaders was in the spotlight due to the uncertainty surrounding the Trump administration's policy toward the Asia Pacific. To add further, the visit of US President Trump to attend the APEC Summit at Danang in November 2017, demonstrates the Trump administration's emphasis on the importance of its relationship with Vietnam. President Trump becomes the first US President to visit Vietnam in their first year in office and it also reiterates the message to US allies and other countries in the region that

the ‘United States is not pivoting away’ (Parameswaran, 2017). It further signals that “Trump administration’s engagement of the sub-region remains an early priority and that it continues to place an importance in cultivating Vietnam as an emerging partner in the region” (Hong, 2017).

3.2. Vietnam and Japan

Vietnam shares a very significant relationship with Japan under the paradigm of ‘multilateralization and diversification’ of its evolving foreign policy initiatives. It is noteworthy to remember that the bilateral relationship was upgraded to an ‘Extensive Strategic Partnership for Peace and Prosperity in Asia’ in 2014 by the two heads of the States. Japan is the largest donor, an important trading partner and investor in Vietnam enjoys a strategic position in its foreign policy establishments and thereby securing its stake in the region. Japan and Vietnam have been boosting their defense ties as part of their broader extensive strategic partnership over the past few years. Growing Japanese maritime security assistance to Vietnam such as naval drills, closer coast guard cooperation, as well as humanitarian assistance and disaster relief and facilitating Japanese ports have been highlights of this deepening partnership between the two countries.

3.3. Vietnam and Australia

The bilateral links between Australia and Vietnam have developed significantly and have matured into an Enhanced Comprehensive Partnership. Key pillars of the relationship between the two countries have been grounded in “shared strategic interests in maintaining peace and stability in the region; a trading relationship which has been Australia’s fastest-growing among the larger ASEAN economies in recent years; enduring educational links; and Vietnam’s recognition of Australia’s role as a constructive and generous aid donor” (Australian Government, 2018). The relationship reflects upon diverse bilateral issues, encompassing wide-ranging cooperation on political issues, trade, and investment, defense and security, policing, immigration, combating transnational crime, people smuggling and human trafficking. Over the years, this relationship has matured into one of the most important in the region—a substantive, positive and mutually beneficial economic, political and security relationship, reinforced by warm and expanding people-to-people links (DFAT, 2015).

3.4. Vietnam and India

India has also been of very special strategic interest to Vietnam. Over the years, Delhi has gradually expanded its defense and naval cooperation with Vietnam and assisted in its urgent effort at modernizing the military force (Mohan, 2015b). India’s outreach to Vietnam has been a clear indication of its open challenge to China in its own backyard. “A more engaged India will also lead to a

more stable balance of power in the region” (Pant, 2017). Fearing the growing aggression of China, Vietnam has welcomed and embraced India in this particular stance. The high-level comprehensive strategic partnership between India and Vietnam is equally important as it shares the worries about increasing Chinese presence in the region. “Vietnam regards naval activity by larger nations like India and the US in the area as a useful deterrent against China” (Clark, 2017).

According to security experts, since China continues to increase its influence, defense and maritime cooperation and procurements from countries like India, the United States, and Japan enables Vietnam to uphold its position. Internal synergies between the two countries have also played a significant role in bringing the two countries on the same page building upon mutual trust and cooperation over the years. These would include historical, religious and cultural linkages; political and economic cooperation between the two countries; and international cooperation at the sub-regional, regional and multilateral forums.

4. Indo-Pacific Strategy of India and Vietnam

Given the internal synergies between India and Vietnam and external responses of the Great Powers, certain key strategies have been evolved for promoting the international position of India and Vietnam in the Indo-Pacific region. In the emerging security dynamic in the Indo-Pacific region both India and Vietnam must work towards forging a strong strategic partnership besides the usual bilateral defense and economic cooperation. “The need for expanded partnerships or mini-laterals should be given serious consideration by India and Vietnam” (Pulipaka, 2016). Vietnam has been a significant leg in augmenting India’s Act East Policy. It is looked by India as its entry point for establishing a presence in the South China Sea. For Vietnam, India remains a trusted and reliable partner and a balancer in the context of ‘Great Power’ strategy in the Indo-Pacific. Responses of the regional powers also become significant in the context of changing geopolitics which has also shaped the strategies of India and Vietnam in the Indo-Pacific.

4.1. Mini-lateral Strategic Cooperation

Improvement in the India-Japan ties in the recent past and Vietnam’s growing engagement with Japan creates opportunities for a potential trilateral agreement consisting of *India-Vietnam-Japan* for shaping the ‘power politics’ in the region. In the background of growing strategic convergences between India-US relations and Vietnam’s robust relationship with the United States in recent times (particularly, a turnaround after the Vietnam War) and the geopolitical realities in the Asia-Pacific calls for trilateral engagements between the *India-Vietnam-United States*.

For exploring the opportunities for greater collaboration between the *United States, Japan, and*

Vietnam, possibilities for a trilateral cooperation between the three countries have also been making rounds in various security establishments in the United States. Given the evolving comprehensive strategic ties between Vietnam and Australia and the already existing Comprehensive partnership with India, to expand the relations further in a mutually beneficial way, prospects of *Vietnam-Australia-India* trilateral cooperation may be potentially explored. Amidst the changing dynamics of Asian geopolitics, a quadrilateral partnership among the *India-Japan-Australia-United States* is also evolving.

Strategic thinkers have argued that “these trilateral partnerships are not alliances, but they constitute frameworks of cooperation for enhancing domestic capacities in the realm of economy and defense preparedness” (Pulipaka, 2016). This emerging partnership and prospects for ‘minilaterals’ must be explored as a key strategy to engage with all the Member States of ASEAN – and Vietnam playing a leading role in it.

4.2. *India-Vietnam and the Indo-Pacific Regionalism*

India and Vietnam can play a leading role in Indo-Pacific regionalism by forging their ties and harping upon convergences in regional multilateral and sub-regional initiatives as elaborated below:

APEC: Vietnam, a close ally of India in the Asia-Pacific region and the strongest in India’s Act East Policy, has a huge potential in playing an imperative role for easing India’s full membership into APEC. Vietnam is also one of the resilient stakeholders in the APEC. India and Vietnam have unequivocally earmarked the strengthening of economic cooperation as a major facet of the bilateral relations. Vietnam President Tran Dai Quang during his recent state visit to India reiterated Vietnam’s support for India’s permanent membership in United Nations Security Council (UNSC) and APEC. India’s Indo-Pacific strategy aims to put Vietnam as the gateway for India to APEC, which despite being marred with intricate teething-troubles, has plenty of spectacular prospects not only for both countries but for the wider region also.

East Asia Summit: East Asia Summit (EAS) has emerged as a forum for strategic dialogue and cooperation on political, security and economic issues of common regional concern and is expected to play an important role in the regional architecture under the initiative of ASEAN (Government of India, 2018). India and Vietnam are significant partners and endorse regional collaborations on priority areas as identified within the framework of EAS—“environment and energy, education, finance, global health issues, and pandemic diseases, natural disaster management and ASEAN connectivity” (Government of India, 2018). According to General V. K. Singh, Minister of State for External Affairs, Govt. of India, “We should be making maritime cooperation a priority and central to our discourse” (Government of India, 2017). With this background, both India and Vietnam can emerge as

significant partners for resolving maritime disputes in a peaceful manner in accordance with the universally recognized principles of International Law notably 1982 UNCLOS. Therefore, within the core areas of EAS India and Vietnam can focus on the need to develop transport, infrastructure and connectivity proposals like the road link from India to Vietnam and direct air connectivity from New Delhi to Ho Chi Minh City are already under discussion. To add further, building upon India’s deep cultural civilizational links with the EAS countries, “India can play a major role in cultural and people to people cooperation with the region, reinforcing the economic momentum for community building” (Muni, 2006).

RCEP: The ASEAN-led RCEP which includes Japan, South Korea, China, India, Australia, and New Zealand will be important in asserting their interests in an open, multilateral system. As a mega-trade deal that aims to cover goods, services, investments, economic and technical co-operation, competition and intellectual property rights, RCEP is expected to carry forward deals on trade liberalization with market access on services trade and goods trade. “For India, RCEP presents a platform to further its strategic and economic status in the Asia-Pacific region. Expected to be the largest regional trading bloc in the world, accounting for nearly 45 percent of the global population and combined gross domestic product of \$21.3 trillion, it might bring the biggest economies of the region into a trading arrangement for the first time” (Business Standard, 2018). RCEP could give Indian and Vietnamese companies a chance to be part of the Global Value Chain. “The RCEP countries are a hub of low-cost manufacturing and trade in the global economy and it also includes major resource-rich countries like Australia and Singapore which is a services trade and financial center. It could give an opportunity to India and Vietnam to embed itself in the world economy’s supply chain which now exists very effectively in South East Asia and China, and boost its exports and employment” (Sengupta, 2018). As members of RCEP, Both India and Vietnam can play a crucial role in carrying forward negotiations for establishing a successful regional economic integration model in the Indo-Pacific.

3. Conclusion

To conclude, it can be said that India's vision on the Indo-Pacific is similar to Vietnam's approach, which is about inclusiveness, openness, and engagement rather than confrontation. Together, they have vowed to work for open and prosperous Indo-Pacific. Both the leaders Tran Dai Quang, the resident of Vietnam and Narendra Modi, the Prime Minister of India “are committed to expanding their maritime ties and ensure an open, transparent, inclusive and rule-based regional architecture where sovereignty and international laws are respected and disputes are resolved through dialogues”.

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