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India-Vietnam Relationship and South China Sea Diplomacy

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Abstract

Relationships between nations are based on many factors like bilateral cooperation, economic dependency, defence, security, and maritime interest. The same is the case with the India-Vietnam partnership. This article mainly focuses on maritime interests between these two nations, specifically regarding the South China Sea region. Maritime routes are important because they are cheaper than any other medium of transport and communication. SCS is a very important trade route, and many super powers have their eyes on this region. India needs to focus more on these maritime trade routes to become powerful to improve its economic caliber. Indian stakes are wider in SCS because almost 55 % of India's trade passes through this area. To protect this maritime trade route, India needs other nations' cooperation. Due to the South China Sea dispute and Chinese hegemonic dominance in this region, ASEAN nations are at higher risk because most nations have their boundaries in this region. One nation among them is Vietnam which has directly shown its dispute to the world. As we all know that according to Kautilya, "Enemy's enemy is our friend," and China's relationship is not good with both nations, India and Vietnam. So, these two nations can cooperate to counter China and collaborate to improve their economic capability. The strong presence of India in the SCS region will help Vietnam and other ASEAN nations get maximum economic benefit and reduce Chinese dominance. This will give the world a safe and secure Indo-Pacific and SCS region.

Keywords: South China Sea (SCS), ASEAN, Indo-Pacific, relationship, Maritime, Trade, Economy, India, China, Vietnam.

Introduction

From the historical era to the present, India and Vietnam have shared the same experiences, like fighting against the colonial rule for their independence and developing their economic capability. To gain its geo-political interest India has found Vietnam as an important partner in its strategic calculation. India not only supported Vietnam in its freedom struggle but also helped Vietnam in its efforts to solve the South China Sea dispute and make a peaceful South East Asia region. When other regional powers like New Zealand, Australia, and South Korea have not shown their interest in speaking against South China Sea dispute only to avoid Chinese aggression, at that time, India strengthened its diplomatic and strategic ties with Hanoi despite warnings from China. Under Look East Policy and further Act East Policy, India has always mentioned Vietnam as a closed and important partner in gaining its South East Asian goals. According to Vietnam's ambassador to India, Phan Sanh Chau, both countries believe that ASEAN is the main pillar of any regional security structure and would help India extend its dimension "reach beyond the Indian Ocean.

Since the relationship was founded by two founding members of India and Vietnam, the relationship between both nations has been very friendly and cooperative. The political contacts, high-level visits, and economic interdependency have further strengthened their relationship. Trade, investment, defence cooperation, maritime security, and economic linkages continue to grow. For India, Vietnam plays a major role in India's South East Asian diplomacy because Vietnam is an important regional power and gateway for other South East Asian nations from an Indian perspective. Both countries cooperate to grow their economic capacity in regional and multilateral forums like Mekong Ganga, ASEAN, WTO, UNO, and East Asia Summit (EAS). India is among Vietnam's top 10 trading partners, and their trade

and investment are still growing. Other than the economy, the other sector is defence cooperation which is very important for both nations from their security perspective. The Memorandum of Understanding on defence cooperation was signed between both countries, and defence Line of Credit was already exceeded from the Indian side. Training of defence personnel, ship visits, scientific exchanges and high-level defence visits show that India and Vietnam have good diplomatic and defence relationships. But this is only the beginning. There is a long road to travel to strengthen their bond to another level. The relationship between both nations is good and needs to be nourished further. Still, China's dominating presence in Vietnam's surrounding and especially near South China Sea region is disturbing India's goodwill and relationship with South East Asian nations. India is interested in South China Sea region because same, as the Indian Ocean, SCS is also an important route of trade that will help in shaping the Indian economy and its regional interest. South China Sea region provides a gateway to reach South East Asian nations to fulfill India's maritime interest. Like-minded countries, India and Vietnam, can enhance their naval cooperation and develop a determined approach toward Chinese aggression in the region.

Not only because of trade but also due to China's hegemonic attitude towards the SCS region, India is interested in this area. For India, the other important areas of interest in this region are commercial linkages, trade relationships, oil exploration, energy security, maritime interest, freedom of navigation, and developing a rule-based regional order. From 1947, when India gained independence for a long period, South East Asia was treated as a neglected region in Indian diplomacy. Still, with the change in geo-political and geo-strategical scenario, India started not only looking towards nations of this region but also acting towards this area to maintain its status as an authentic middle power in the Indo-Pacific region. The main reason behind the Chinese presence in SCS is that whenever there is a power vacuum, China will try hard to fill that gap instantly, which is concerning for both like-minded nations, India and Vietnam. China's dominating approach and its expanding policy are well known all over the world. Chinese dominating presence in South China Sea region will not only affect this area but also disturb Indo-Pacific power diplomacy will impact the India-Vietnam relationship badly.

There are a lot of potential areas in which India can cooperate with ASEAN nations, like trade & investment, e-commerce, culture, education, skill development, health, medicines, and tourism. As per the strategic interest of India South China Sea lies at its edge, which is known as a junction between the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean. The SCS links East Asia, the Pacific, South Asia, the Indian Ocean, and the Middle East. This region can also be regarded as a buffer zone that prevents India from attack by many powers. The great maritime thinker A.T. Mahan once said, "Who will rule over the sea will rule over the world." And to justify this sentence's relevance, which is still true in the 21st century, India's grip of maritime routes is necessary. A strong grip on SCS will further reduce its dependency on superpowers for maritime needs and security. Not only for India's maritime interest, but the SCS region is also very important for India's Act East strategy.

India's Role in Indo-Pacific Region

the Indo-Pacific region will provide India with a base to get its political, economic, and security interests in the South East Asian region. The region (SEA), which was neglected earlier, got full focus under the regime of the Modi government. The Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, in his speech at Sangri-La Dialogue (2018), especially focussed 'India's vision of the Indo-Pacific region' for the first time and also mentioned the Indo-Pacific region 11 times in his foreign policy speech to make this region free, open and prosperous. He also said that SEA will always be regarded as an important region in India's policy, and relationship with this area will be based on 5 S in Hindi (Samman (respect), Samvad (Dialogue), Sahyog (Cooperation), Shanti (Peace) and Samridhi (Prosperity)).

As a peace-loving nation, India has always worked for the betterment and peaceful development of the Indo-Pacific region, particularly the South China Sea area. As history shows, India has never-ever tried to disturb the peace and stability of any region, and that's why she deserves a better role in maintaining prosperity, peace and stability in the region and the world. India's Look East Policy, which started in 1991, was upgraded to Act East Policy in 20q14 and is now further elaborated as a vast Indo-Pacific policy to strengthen political, economic, cultural, security, and maritime relationship with South East Asian nations and beyond. India has also made the Indo-Pacific region a focal point of regions like South East, South, and East Asia.

The growing popularity of China in the Indo-Pacific region is a serious threat to India's maritime interests. The position of India is uncertain in the Indo-Pacific region. That's why India needs a better and full-time policy for this region to gain its interest and help establish a safe and secure Indo-Pacific part that will be safe from all maritime threats like smuggling, trafficking, movement of illegal immigrants, counterfeiting, etc.

India-Vietnam Relationship and their Maritime Interests

dynamic engagement of India in SCS has received Vietnam's attention, love, and support for Indian policies. Vietnam regards India as a reliable partner and their bilateral relationship as warm, vibrant, dynamic, and trusted.

To counter China's SCS ambition, India needs Vietnam's support and cooperation. Both nations continuously try to deepen their bilateral ties to get a secured position in the Indo-Pacific region, which is necessary for their maritime trade and security. Vietnam's foreign policy is based on "multilateralization and diversification of international relations.

To pursue foreign policy principles, Vietnam has focussed on deepening its relationship with many major powers so that its strategic interest can be diversified and fulfilled from many dimensions. In its major power dimension, India has won recognition from Vietnam's perspective as a 'benign power 'which will benefit Hanoi in the long term.

Conclusion

Secure and stable maritime communication route is necessary for every nation's growth. Among South East Asian nations, Vietnam's place is special for India because its dominance in the South China Sea will help India's economic development. India-Vietnam strengthened

alignment in defence, trade, and social sectors will benefit both nations to counter Chinese aggression in South China Sea region. The sea is rich in minerals, oil, gas, gems, and many other valuable items. That's why not only littoral and hinterland states but many nations far from its boundaries are interested in this area. To fulfill its economic needs, India needs to focus on the South China Sea area with the help of Vietnam, which will benefit both nations in terms of economic growth or countering China.

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