

## **Patrol boats for Vietnam: India quietly securing maritime lanes**

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**10 August 2013**

The interface which conjoins the growing but tacit complementarity in Indo-Vietnam relationship breeds on the essence of “the enemy of my enemy is my friend”, albeit sans the degree of hostility normally accorded to the famed adage. Both India and Vietnam share a history of common hostility with China but India has astutely treated its relationship with Vietnam per se rather than cleaving to bellicose posturing based on a common-enemy chorus. Slowly and steadily India has been increasing its stakes in and around Vietnam, particularly since the two countries embarked on the creation of an “Arc of Advantage and Prosperity” in a 2003 joint declaration aimed at boosting bilateral cooperation between the two countries through a sea corridor linkage. This seemingly commercial quest by India and Vietnam necessarily carried a strategic rendition, given the geopolitical complexity associated with the South China Sea apropos Sino-Vietnam relations.

India has been strongly defending its right to explore for oil in the Gulf of Tonking and the Phu Kahn Basin. In India’s decision to get involved with Vietnam in the ‘disputed’ parts of South China Sea there is an assertion of the fact that it is a conscious decision. When Commerce and Industry Minister Anand Sharma called India’s engagement in Vietnam a “win-win” situation in his visit to Vietnam in March last year it only emphasised the assertion. It is in this context that India’s latest decision to open up a line of credit to Vietnam becomes important.

India’s recent decision to open up a \$100-million credit line to Vietnam to purchase military equipment, particularly four patrol boats, is a decision which apart from being symbolic of enhancement in bilateral cooperation between the two countries reflects India’s changing priorities in its neighbourhood. The decision reflects a trade-strategic-military troika approach of New Delhi towards Hanoi, in that sequence of priority. The patrol boats for which the line of credit has been opened will ensure a safe passage amidst increasing sea trade and sea faring through the Indo-Pacific corridor. Both India and Vietnam together with the US have been working towards ensuring freedom of navigation in the Indo-Pacific which hosts one of the largest sea traffic in the world. Since sea trade through the Indo-Pacific is only going to increase in the coming times (70% of global sea trade by 2015), it is only logical that India works towards a safe trade transit through a region that is in its backyard.

The relevance of the Indo-Pacific in the scheme of Indo-Vietnam relations became amply clear during the recent visit of Vietnam Foreign Minister Pham Binh Min to India earlier this month. His address at the Indian Council of World Affairs which was titled as “Strengthening Vietnam-India Bonds for Peace and Prosperity in the Indo-Pacific” goes on to say a lot about the nature of partnership Vietnam seeks with India in the changing geopolitical circumstances.

The address primarily dealt with two major themes; the global and regional changes affecting the Asian security environment, and secondly the 'Regional Architecture-India's and ASEAN'S Role'. Both of these intrinsically concern the Indo-Pacific.

Among the four most important developments that have led to a different security environment and an altered balance of power in Asia, the Vietnam foreign minister mentioned India's Look East Policy as one of the important developments thereby putting India's important policy at par with the US rebalance in Asia. It is more than clear that Vietnam looks to India as a counterweight to China, although India has played down any such aspiration. Reality is a lot more complicated than meets the eye. India cannot display a projection of outright support for Vietnam and antagonise China, a thinking that stems from India's NAM policy. In its inability to do so India has appropriated a more nuanced foreign policy approach towards Vietnam. It is for the same reason that any direct invitation by Vietnam to India for direct naval involvement in the South China Sea is played down by India, but such rejection is nonetheless followed by commercial excursions in the Gulf of Tonkin and the Phu Kahn Basin.

India's opening up the credit line to Vietnam should also be looked at as an act of reciprocation by India and acquiescence to the latter's call for evincing a 'global responsibility'. During his visit to India earlier this month the Vietnamese foreign minister evoked an 'international responsibility' for countries like India to protect and safeguard the 'global commons', which he referred to as a responsibility of a major power like India. Hanoi also called for 'Strategic Trust' between India and Vietnam. It is to these calls that India seems to be responding by opening the important line of credit to Vietnam.

With more than USD 5 billion in the pipeline, Vietnam is going to be very critical to India's Look East Policy. India's overarching approach to Indo-Vietnam relations is going to be a balance between a framework constitutive of collective security, regional peace, freedom of navigation and a code of conduct in the Indo-Pacific region and India's energy security needs in the South China Sea. While Vietnam might be looking at India as a potential deus ex machina in its troubled relation with China, India views Vietnam as an important cog in the wheel of its prospective collective security framework in the Indo-Pacific. Vietnam will play an important role in the assertion of India's maritime and commercial rights in the South China Sea as well as the Indo-Pacific in the coming times. It is with this expectation that India is approaching the Indo-Vietnam relationship.

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