

The New Geopolitical Realities in Afghanistan: India's Constructive Role as US Partner

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Strategic competition in Afghanistan is not a new phenomenon, but is inherent in its geo-strategic position. Afghanistan derives its political significance because of its geo-strategic position i.e. it is situated at the crossroads of ancient civilisations – Indian, European, Chinese. The modern state of Afghanistan has the curse of being the battleground of intense ideological, political and military conflict between the great powers. If it was the epicentre of the 'Great Game' between the Great Britain and Russia for hegemony over Central Asia and South Asia in the second half of the 19th century; it became a decisive factor in holding reign of the US over the Soviet Union during the Cold War that ultimately led to disintegration of the Soviet Union. In addition, various global actors supported by the regional powers have endorsed non-conventional strategies like terrorism and civil wars bringing devastating impact on Afghanistan's stability. The centuries of conflict has made Afghanistan a perpetual security nightmare- an outcome of complex interplay of internal disturbances and political interference of the global and regional players. Afghanistan, often called the graveyard of empires has itself become graveyard of civilization due to decades of conflict fought to preserve geopolitical interests of the great powers.

During both, the Great Game and the Cold War periods, global players pursued regional grouping to counter its nemesis. It was the regional players like Pakistan, Iran, India and Saudi Arabia that played dominant roles in shaping and securing the outcome of rivalries of the great powers.

New Geopolitical Realities and China as the New Player in the Great Game

New geopolitical realities are reshaping the contours of the global politics, with China behaving more aggressively and dominantly across South Asia, South East Asia and Africa. It is challenging the unilateral world the US has dominated for over two decades since the end of the Cold War. Similarly, the US is trying to reassert its hegemony over the global order. What appears from the emerging trend of political and diplomatic moves from China and the US is that a new Cold War is imminent in near the future between the two countries, introducing new security dynamics in Afghanistan.

The National Security Policy and the New Defence Strategy of the US seem to be leading to a contentious US approach towards the 'revisionist' Russia and China. The impending threat is from China which has challenged its supremacy over the South China Sea and Indo-Pacific region, forcing the US to revise its policy towards China.¹ At the same time Chinese growing imprint in these regions has sent mixed signals to the US and its allies.

In its National Security Strategy Paper, unveiled in December 2017, the US has suggested helping South Asian nations maintain their sovereign against increasing Chinese influence in the region. In other words, it would act to keep revisionist power like China from gaining strength in the region.

China is on ascendance in Afghanistan. It is fast expanding in the region. It has strengthened its ties with many Central Asian countries, and is increasing trade and commerce ties with Afghanistan. It has in the last couple of years created a crucial space for itself, which it is using for a future political solution in Afghanistan that is conducive to its economic interests.

Undoubtedly, it has made its presence felt in the region as it has done in many other countries with heavy investment in infrastructure and diplomatic engagement coupled with financial guarantees.² China remains the third largest trading partner and the largest source country of investment in Afghanistan. The bilateral trade between China and Afghanistan has crossed US\$1 billion mark. China has proposed to include Afghanistan in the US\$57 billion economic corridor in Pakistan, a part of Beijing's

Belt and Road initiative. Afghanistan has welcomed Chinese offer to join the belt and road initiative, and china is slowly becoming reliable partner of Afghanistan.³

New Strategy, New Alignment of the Regional Players

Afghanistan has always been at risk of unwelcome external influences, primarily from the opportunistic neighbouring states. No regional state is prepared to allow another to gain a preponderance of influence in Afghanistan. Moreover, each retains links to client networks that are capable of fractionalizing and incapacitating an emerging Afghanistan.⁴ China sees an opportunity in bringing all these countries together to form a unique front against growing India-US relationship in the region. There is formalization of relations going on among China-Pakistan-Russia-Iran on one hand, and on the other US-India-Afghanistan. Each country is crucial for the outcome of the Afghan problem, and each country has its own set of interests and its own strategies to gain maximum stronghold in the region.

Pakistan is the most predatory neighbour of Afghanistan. In the last few decades, it has been a key player, and a crucial ally of the US in determining the fate of the war the US had fought against the Soviets as well as the Islamic terror groups like the Al-Qaeda, the Taliban and now the Islamic State of Khorasan. It has often been blamed for helping the international forces on one hand, and patronising the terrorist groups on the other. Pakistan has played this double game purely for the sake of gaining what it calls strategic depth in Afghanistan.

The new Trump Government in the US is not happy with Pakistan's policy on Afghanistan, where it sees the country's refusal to act against Taliban insurgency as part of its larger game plan for an unstable Afghanistan. President Trump has warned Pakistan to mend its ways or else be ready to pay the price. The US administration has increased pressure on Pakistan by trying to put it on the "gray list" of the Financial Action Task Force, cutting off US\$1.3 billion in aid. However, every time the US has pressurised Pakistan to act tough against the terrorists, it has played its China card. What appears from the latest developments is that Pakistan is ready to move to the China camp at the cost of American interest. Scholar Andrew Small suggests that unlike the

past, China won't hesitate to defend Pakistan, if it becomes impossible to retain the *status quo* of the relation between the two.⁵ Over the long term, China would welcome estrangement in US-Pakistan ties, as it will provide it the space to unilaterally dominate Pakistan and reap benefits of its strategic location. It has traditionally sought to bolster Islamabad's capacity to serve as a hedge against India's rise.⁶

Iran too has made bold strategic gambit in Afghanistan. Once a very strong rival of Pakistan-based insurgent groups, it now has its own calculations to support the Taliban in Afghanistan to keep it unstable and force the international community to leave Afghanistan.⁷ Saudi Arabia, which has been a loyal partner of the US and Pakistan against communism, backed Taliban for long before turning away from the group.⁸ Russia is also pushing for its influence in the region, and is accused of supporting the Taliban.⁹

One thing which is common in China-Pakistan-Russia-Iran axis is that these countries want the international forces out of Afghanistan. Neither Iran nor Russia want the US in their backyard what they consider as their strategic area of influence. Similarly Pakistan has its own interest in keeping the region unstable. While, China is at the forefront of this new Axis, trying to bring into line the interests of these regional players with its own interests in the region; the US is trying to counter the growing imprints of the China-Russia nexus, which it terms as revisionist.

India stands out as an interesting player in the region. In Afghanistan India would like a stable regime which is sensitive to Indian interests. It had backed the Soviet Union installed government in Afghanistan in 1979 and has given its support to every successive government, before the takeover by the Taliban.¹⁰ India's support for stable Afghanistan is driven by many extraneous factors such as India's historic conflict with Pakistan, which through its proxies in Afghanistan has used its territory against India.¹¹ India's expanding economy and search for markets in Central Asia through Iran and Afghanistan is also an important determinant.¹²

China's Policy Contrasts the US Policy in Afghanistan

The question is – how will Afghanistan be affected by the growing conflict between the two nations and their allies? At the outset, it is clear that the two global powers will not be involved in outright military adventurism in the region. The kind of economic interdependence they have, apart from significant cooperation in other areas including the climate change, it appears unlikely that they will be fighting a war to counter each other's influence. However, there is all possibility that they might engage in strategic manoeuvres, with the US trying to curtail the Chinese influence in the region, as well as Chinese trying to limit the US dominance in Afghanistan.

Although both China and the US want to have a conflict free, stable Afghanistan, they have chosen different approaches to pursue their goals. Two major areas of divergence in their policies are going to be the real bone of contention between the two countries.

First, the Chinese want a political solution to Afghan problem that could mean accommodating the warring factions including the Taliban; a solution, which is in direct conflict with the present US dispensation, which currently wants to quell the deadly insurgency in the region, before negotiating a peace deal. In December 2016, in a trilateral meeting; senior diplomats from China, Pakistan and Russia, in Moscow, supported lifting of international sanctions on the Taliban leaders.¹³ China, Russia and Pakistan have repeatedly asked the UN and the US government to lift the sanctions on the Taliban. However, the US government appears to disagree. In January 2018, the US administration slapped fresh sanctions on four Taliban and two Haqqani Network leaders for terrorist activities.¹⁴ Secondly the Chinese embrace of Pakistan is again in contrast to new US defence and security strategy for the region. Pakistan, which has been a US ally for decades, has witnessed public censure from the Trump Administration. It has long been accused of being an ally of the international forces in Afghanistan, at the same time being promoter and facilitator of terrorism in the region. Additionally, Chinese growing economic imprint in Afghanistan would also mean strengthening its hold over the landlocked Central Asia, which could further benefit from the trade and commerce in the region. This will be a threat to the American interests in Central Asia.

One thing is clear in Afghanistan – both China and the US are making their security bets in Afghanistan. One, to retain its position as the most powerful country in the world, the other to upset the hegemony the US has enjoyed for decades. One factor that is making immense influence in the region is the economic heft of China. By nature, economic changes start to bring about changes in the distribution of strategic power. It is here, where the US is losing to the Chinese. American aid and military presence is creating contrasting image of Americans among Afghans, which cannot match the image of the Chinese as a reliable partner, which has invested a lot on tangible infrastructure projects. Secondly, it appears the US has lost a crucial strategic partner in Pakistan, which holds enormous strategic influence over Afghanistan. In fact it has not only lost, but the old ally is now comfortably placed in the opponent's camp of China. The grouping of Iran and Russia with China and Pakistan has compounded the US problems in Afghanistan. And, therefore, the US needs more than just military boots and economic aid to counter the growing influence of the Chinese in the region, and this is where India can play a crucial role.

India is Answer to China not Pakistan

Indian interests converge with the interests of the Chinese and the US in Afghanistan – which is to see a peaceful, stable Afghanistan. India, like the US, has a lot at stake in the region and will not be comfortable with the kind of political solution the Chinese want, certainly not with the kind of prominence the Chinese policy gives to Pakistan. Ideally, India would want Chinese to find solution to the Afghan problem without much support from Pakistan, which by now has been thoroughly exposed for its links with the insurgent groups operating in the region. India would have its own reservations as far as peace talks are concerned. India may not be completely averse to certain sections of the Taliban being given political mileage, with heavy load of checks and balances to accompany.¹⁵ Therefore, even though India and the US along with China might want a peaceful, stable Afghanistan, there is a clear case of divergences in their approaches towards how to achieve and to what level trade off with the warring faction can take place.

India has implemented some important infrastructural projects in the past and is implementing some new projects such as the Shahtoot Dam and drinking water project for Kabul that would also facilitate irrigation, water supply for Charikar City, and road connectivity to Band-e-Amir in Bamyan Province that would promote tourism. In addition, India will also take up 116 High Impact Community Development Projects in 31 provinces of Afghanistan.¹⁶ India has pledged or spent around US\$ 3 billion worth of aid over the last decade.

Similar investment has been made by China and the US. The kind of investment all these countries have made in Afghanistan will be fruitful only when Afghanistan is stable, without the kind of violence it is witnessing. Similarly a stable government is pre-requisite to violence free Afghanistan. Afghanistan with its immense resources can be a cog in the development of the region. Both India and China with expanding economy and population would require these strategic resources and capabilities for their own benefits, and, therefore, two countries could act together for a stable Afghanistan. However there is monumental difference between ideal soft power policy adopted by India, and the hardcore realpolitik game played by the Chinese in the region.

The consolidation of anti-US forces in the form of China-Russia-Iran-Pakistan has worried international forces in Afghanistan. However, India unlike the US, still shares good ties with some of these countries. It has till now been able to achieve a balance between its friends, by keeping itself distant from their inter-personal tensions; additionally, it has not allowed the state of their inter-personal relations to dictate policy choice to India, the textbook case is its plan to build Chabahar Port in Iran and provide alternative route to Afghanistan. The growing tension between Iran and the USA and between Russia and the US has not affected India's relation with these two countries, which by all means are powerful players in Afghanistan. Indo-Russian relations are not at all time high because of Russia's growing collusion with China and Pakistan, but the relation has maintained the level of maturity it had decades ago.

Overall, India is placed more comfortably than the US in the region to balance the growing imprints of the Chinese, as India

holds similar advantages with some of these countries. Secondly, India's growing economic and bilateral ties give it advantage over the US.

Backed by the US, India can be a crucial player in Afghanistan. The US and India together can achieve more than what the US has been able to achieve till now. At the same time it would send a strong message to subversive forces in the region that the Afghan peace process cannot be hostage to strategic interests of a few countries. It will highlight the fact that India has a crucial role to play in assisting the Afghan State to achieve peace, eliminate terrorism and stabilise the country.

Endnotes

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Report on Visit of USI Delegation to Vietnam 27-30 November 2017

Major General BK Sharma, AVSM, SM and Bar (Retd)®

General

Institute for Defence International Relations (IDIR) of Vietnam

and United Service Institution of India (USI) undertake delegation level exchanges in New Delhi and Hanoi alternatively, since 2006. The IDIR is a premium 'Think Tank' of Ministry of Defence of Vietnam, with direct access to the country's top leadership. A USI delegation comprising the following members visited Vietnam from 27 Nov to 30 Nov 2017:-

- (a) Vice Admiral Shekhar Sinha, PVSM, AVSM, NM and Bar (Retd), USI Council Member, former Chief of Integrated Defence Staff to Chairman, Chiefs of Staff Committee (CISC) and Commander in Chief Western Naval Command.
- (b) Lieutenant General AK Ahuja, PVSM, UYSM, AVSM, SM, VSM and Bar (Retd), USI Council Member, former Defence Attaché to Vietnam and Deputy Chief of Defence Staff, Headquarters Integrated Defence Staff (IDS).
- (c) Major General BK Sharma, AVSM, SM and Bar (Retd), Deputy Director (Research) and Head of Centre for Strategic Studies and Simulation, USI.
- (d) Major General PK Goswami, VSM (Retd), Deputy Director (Adm) at the USI, Former Senior Directing Staff, National Defence College.
- (e) Colonel PS Punia, SM, VSM, Indian Defence Attaché in Hanoi (representative from Embassy of India).
- (f) Shri Aman Bansal, Second Secretary (representative from Embassy of India).

The Vietnam side was led by Senior Colonel Nguyen Thanh Dong, Deputy Director, IDIR and included the following:-

- (a) Colonel Tran Hoai Nam.
- (b) Colonel Le Trac Vuong.
- (c) Lieutenant Colonel Tran Minh An.
- (d) Lieutenant Colonel Tran Van Quan.

- (f) Leading strategic experts from universities and other civil Think Tanks.

Interaction with IDIR Vietnam

The two sides discussed geopolitical trends in the Indo-Pacific region, dynamics of Indo-Vietnam relations with China and the US and developments in outer space and cyber space. Key points of presentations are summarised as under:-

- (a) Vice Admiral Shekhar Sinha spoke on the topic “*Security Environment in Indo-Pacific Region: Challenges and Prospects*”. He provided an in-depth analysis of traditional and non- traditional security threats in the Indo- Pacific and offered a slew of recommendations to build mutual trust and mitigate security challenges through bilateral and multi-lateral cooperative arrangements.
- (b) Colonel Tran Hoai Nam, Head of Association of the South East Nations (ASEAN) – Asean Regional Forum (ARF) Division, Vietnam, spoke on the topic “*Situation in East Sea, the Impact to Region.*” He described the South China Sea dispute as a major flash point and a source of regional instability. In his view, China after creating ‘New Facts on Ground’, strives for a tactical *status quo* and in the meanwhile woos other claimant countries to sign a ‘Code of Conduct’ mechanism. China has driven a wedge in the ASEAN and it is unlikely that the 10 member countries will reach a consensus on how to deal with the problem. The US, on the other hand will assert for freedom of navigation and step up its military activities in the region. Japan has emerged as another important player in the South China Sea and is bolstering its relations with Taiwan and Vietnam.
- (c) Major General BK Sharma spoke on “*Sino- Indian Relations and Indo-US Relations*”. In the first part of presentation, he elucidated on China’s strategic outlook and geopolitical imperatives, ‘China Dream’, China’s strategic direction post the 19th Party Congress, determinants of Sino-India relations and drivers of contests between the two countries. In the Indo-US relations, the gambit of issues presented included, Indo-US strategic calculus in the evolving world order, determinants of bilateral relations and points of convergence and divergence. The crux of the two

presentations was to portray India as a leading power, capable of steering its relations with the two world powers in consonance with its worldview and expanding nature of strategic interests. The underlining message was that India will prove to be a reliable strategic partner for Vietnam.

(d) Lieutenant Colonel Tran Minh An, Deputy Head of Asia-Africa Division and Colonel Le Trac Vuong, Head of US-EU Division, Vietnam, spoke on the topic *“The Relationships between Vietnam- China and US”*. He elucidated that China-Vietnam relations have shown a steady progress. China is Vietnam’s largest trading partner with a bilateral trade of \$ 72 billion (2016). In last one year, the bilateral state visits were pitched at the highest leadership level. High-level meetings such as the 10th Meeting of Vietnam-China Steering Committee on Bilateral Cooperation, 4th Round of Border Defence Cooperation Exchange and 6th Vietnam-China Defense Dialogue paved the way for multi-faceted cooperation between the two countries. The two sides have signed a “Joint Vision on Defence Cooperation” till 2025. The two countries have reached an agreement on “Basic Principles Guiding the Settlement of Issues at Sea”. Commenting on the flip-side of bilateral relations, he flagged strategic mistrust, poor strategic communications, South China dispute and difference over Vietnam’s participation in “Belt and Road Initiative”, as some of the contentious issues. Vietnam’s perception of US role in the Indo-Pacific and South China Sea dispute is in consonance with the Indian views, wherein, they perceive that Washington will play a major role in balancing China and maintaining a rule based order in the region. They believe that the US will work towards strengthening the primacy of ASEAN and build up strategic partnership with regional countries to balance China. His presentation, however, reflected some skepticism on the behaviour of Trump Administration to deal with strategic challenges and mounting uncertainties. He said, Vietnam and US are working assiduously to invigorate their economic cooperation under the ambit of “Framework Agreement on Trade and Investment”. Vietnam-US defence relations are guided by Memorandum of Understanding on “Advancing Bilateral Defence Cooperation” (2011) and “Joint Vision

Statement on Defence Relations (2015)". The core areas of defence cooperation are intelligence sharing, maritime security, UN Peacekeeping, denuclearisation, space and humanitarian assistance.

(e) Lieutenant General Anil Kumar Ahuja spoke on "*Achievement and Prospects of India-Vietnam Relations*". He highlighted that India-Vietnam relations are based on strong fundamentals of shared values, strategic autonomy, and commonality of security threats. With the upgradation of relations in 2016 to "Comprehensive Strategic Partnership", new vistas have opened to broaden the bilateral cooperation. Declaration of "Common Vision on Defence Ties" (2015-2020) encompasses a wide array of mechanisms for comprehensive dialogue and meaningful defence cooperation. The defence relations between the two countries is a shining model worth emulating by other countries. He suggested a slew of measures to upgrade the defence cooperation in the hi-tech fields and in the arena of maritime security and asymmetric warfare. He proposed that the two countries should re-fashion their defence cooperation on the Indo-US model framing it as "India-Vietnam Defence Equipment, Training, Technology and Trade Initiative (DETTTI)".

(f) Lieutenant Colonel Tran Van Quan, Deputy Head of Asia-Africa Division, spoke on the topic "*Vietnam-India Relation: Situation and Solution*". He termed Vietnam as a strategic bridge to ASEAN in the context of India's Act East Policy and stressed on the early operationalisation of connectivity between India- Myanmar-Laos-Cambodia-Vietnam. With the signing of 'Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Agreement' and Prime Minister Modi's recent visit to Vietnam, the bilateral relations have received a major fillip. India's offer of US \$500 million line of credit has opened new avenues of meaningful cooperation between the two countries . Bilateral trade is well poised to jump from US \$ 5.5 billion (2016) to US \$15 billion (2020). The two countries cooperate at a number of multinational fora such as ASEAN Defence Minister's Meeting (ADDM) Plus. India's assistance in supply of high-speed patrol vessels, Information

Technology, coastal surveillance, renewable and atomic energy, co-production of Akash missiles, upgradation of Pechora system, research in new generation missiles, production of light helicopters and ship building will go a long way in strengthening the bilateral cooperation. Likewise, initiatives in the fields of education, software development, and cultural exchanges are deepening people to people contact. In his concluding remarks, he focussed on the areas that merit attention to boost bilateral trade and ensure timely implementation of other agreements as per laid down timelines. He also stressed the need to upgrade the cooperation at multilateral forums such as UN, ARF and East Asia Summit (EAS) and in the domain of emerging niche technologies.

(g) Major General PK Goswami, spoke on the topic *“Evolving Frontiers of Warfare in Cyber and Space Domain”*. He touched upon the growing salience of cyber space and outer space as new strategic frontiers of technological advancement and asymmetric warfare. China’s military strategists perceive cyber and counter space capabilities to be more credible and flexible deterrent vis-à-vis nuclear and conventional capabilities. He dwelt upon China’s growing capabilities in the outer space and cyber space, and also how India and Vietnam should cooperate in the outer space and cyber space.

Meeting with Director IDIR

On 29 Nov, the delegation in an exclusive meeting discussed areas of future cooperation with Major General Vu Tien Trong, Director IDIR. Both sides acknowledged that the USI-IDIR dialogue has proved very useful in sharing strategic perspectives in areas of common interest and in providing valuable inputs for formulating policy framework. The Indian side proposed that USI and IDIR should publish a book containing papers presented during the meeting. It was also suggested that the two institutions should conduct scenario based strategic discussions, revolving around strategic brinkmanship and flashpoints in the Indo- Pacific. The Vietnamese side agreed ‘in principle’ to jointly progress these proposals. The Indian side extended an invitation to IDIR for a

bilateral dialogue followed by participation in the National Security Seminar, scheduled in November 2018 at Delhi.

Overall Impressions

The IDIR is a Ministry of Defense 'Think Tank', staffed with serving officers of Vietnam People's Army (VPA). It performs the function of 1.5 Track diplomacy very effectively. The views expressed by the Vietnamese scholars in essence were the views of Government of Vietnam. Likewise, the views of USI delegation were bound to reach the highest level in the Government.

It emerged from the discussions that Vietnam is following a 'two-prong' approach in its relations with China i.e cooperation and hedging. Vietnam will not compromise sovereignty over Spratlys and Paracel Islands, but at the same time will continue to enhance its economic cooperation with China. The two sides have embarked upon substantial 'Confidence Building Measures' (CBMs). China's import of goods from Vietnam has gone up and people to people contact has seen a significant rise. In the security arena, Vietnam is trying to 'keep its head low and bide time to build its capability'. Vietnam is extremely cautious in its dealings with India, US, and other countries, lest it provokes China. They admitted that the younger generation is getting influenced by the glitter of Chinese culture. This proclivity in youth is currently moderated by the older generation, who have greater experience of dealing with China. The harsh reality, however, is that the 'older generation' with the likes of 'General Vo Nguyen Giap', are waning fast.

Vietnamese believe that East Sea (South China Sea) is not a mere 'territorial dispute' but an inflexion point in a wider 'Big Power' 'strategic competition'. The overall situation in 2017 can be described as 'calm', but certainly not 'stable', it is just a 'tactical adjustment' by China on account of the 19th Communist Party of China (CPC) National Congress and because of the ongoing negotiations on the 'Code of Conduct' with other stakeholders. However, barring some minor stand offs, it is assessed that current situation is likely to prevail in the coming year. China is apt at converting non disputes into disputes, creating precedence and defining (unilaterally) rules for the players and thereafter 'slicing

advantage' and consolidating 'new *status quo*' (using tools of physical occupation, diplomacy, legal action, and soft power).

Vietnamese were of the opinion that China is wooing economically weak and unstable member states of ASEAN. The remainder ASEAN members are either aligned with the US or do fine balancing without taking any position on contentious issues. Consequently, the role of ASEAN in resolving the South China Sea dispute has weakened. Vietnam believes that disputes in the South China Sea should be resolved peacefully and in accordance with the international law. They consider dispute over the Paracel as distinct from the Spratlys, as the former is a bilateral dispute between China and Vietnam. In their opinion, the possible answer lies in strengthening multilateral cooperation, and developing more 'practical mutual cooperation', which may reduce China's aggressiveness. They also mentioned building a greater 'ASEAN-India Cooperation' to create a secure environment in the Indo-Pacific. Despite propagating 'multilateral cooperation' it is unlikely that Vietnam will get into any multilateral arrangement which is even remotely perceived to be directed against China (Malabar, "Quad" bloc etc).

In regard to the US, the Vietnamese, despite being circumspect about the role of Trump Administration, felt that Washington will continue to maintain pressure on China to observe rule of law and respect core concerns of smaller countries in the region. The region will witness high profile military exercises by the US and its allies. US seriousness towards the region is substantiated by its continued Freedom of Navigation Operation (FONOPS) and by efforts in keeping South China Sea on the global agenda in the International and Regional conferences. Despite China's economic growth, it is accepted that China cannot compete militarily with the US. However, it was also equally clear that no other nation of South East Asia can match the military capabilities of China. Therefore, the US is considered a major balancing player and Japan the only country in the region which sizes up to China.

Vietnam seems to be 'in a hurry' to build its defence capabilities and develop an indigenous defence industrial base. It wants Indian assistance in hi-technology training, procurement of equipment, and co-production. These aspirations, however, are

tampered by a consideration that Indo- Vietnam ties should not antagonise China. The Indian policymakers should factor in peculiar 'balancing' nature of Vietnam's behaviour in their expectations from the other side. India will have to show patience to build upon existing relationship with Vietnam, making it a bulwark of our 'Act East' policy. Despite long standing and multifaceted defence relations with India, Vietnam perceives certain functional problems-mainly due to varying organisational structure, limitations of language, and inadequate comprehension of each other's system. India needs to heed such concerns and take course correction, where needed.

On questions related to China, Vietnamese were generally evasive in criticising China. They stressed on multilateral cooperation to create an environment to protect Vietnam's interests, advocated to resolve issues by peaceful means within framework of Code of Conduct 2017 and use of international laws e.g. United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) 1982.

Interaction with the Indian Embassy

The USI delegation was accompanied by the Defence Attaché and Second Secretary from the Embassy of India in Hanoi. Subsequently, the delegation interacted with the Indian Ambassador to Vietnam, Ambassador Parvathaneni Harish at the dinner hosted by him and communicated the aforesaid impressions. The Ambassador underscored 'China factor' in Vietnam's domestic, security, and foreign policy. He attributed defence cooperation as a prime mover in India-Vietnam relations and reiterated the need for utmost patience and deftness in steering Indo-Vietnam relations.

Conclusion

USI-IDIR interaction over the years has proved to be a useful platform in sharing perspectives on issues of mutual concern, gauge and shape perceptions. Vietnam harbours excellent goodwill towards India and looks at Delhi as a leading player with a major role in the Indo-Pacific region. Vietnam perceives itself as a strategic bridge between India and ASEAN and is highly supportive of India's Act East Policy. Vietnam sees great opportunities in developing multi-dimensional strategic relations

with India, particularly in high-end technology and defence sector. However, China factor weighs on Vietnam's strategic engagement with India. This aspect will have to be considered in our Vietnam policy and our expectations will have to be accordingly tailored.

On the whole, the visit to Vietnam was very useful in developing rapport with the IDIR and paving the way for enhanced cooperation between the two Think Tanks.

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