

Visit of USI Delegation to Vietnam – A Report

Lieutenant General Satish Nambiar, PVSM, AVSM, VrC (Retd)

Background

The visit was the outcome of concerted efforts made over the last few years to develop a dialogue with Armed Forces personnel and strategic analysts from Vietnam in context of a security relationship with an important South East Asian country that is an immediate neighbour of the People's Republic of China (PRC) and one that is more than well disposed towards India. These efforts culminated in the acceptance of an invitation extended by the United Service Institution of India (USI) for a visit to Delhi by a five member delegation of the Institute for Defence International Relations (IDIR) from 10 to 15 January 2006.

Unfortunately, a few days before that visit was to take place, we received intimation from the Vietnamese expressing their inability to undertake the visit as planned due to (as they put it) "heavy schedule of internal programme". However, in the same communication, the Director IDIR extended an invitation for a USI delegation to visit IDIR at mutually convenient dates. The invitation was accepted and a USI delegation visited IDIR from 10 to 15 May 2006.

Assistance from the Indian Mission

It is in the fitness of things that we record the contribution made by the erstwhile Defence Attaché Colonel Ahuja, and the current one, Colonel Dua, in making the dialogue possible. It is also appropriate that we acknowledge the efforts made by Colonel Dua in making the visit a most productive and useful one. The USI is indeed grateful to him for sparing the time and effort to be with us for most of the time.

The USI is also grateful to the Indian Ambassador in Hanoi, Shri N Ravi and the Consul General in Ho Chi Minh City, Shri Mowana, for their gracious hospitality and consideration. The insights they provided were most interesting and educative.

Lieutenant General Satish Nambiar, PVSM, AVSM, VrC (Retd), is the Director of USI.

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Composition of the Delegation

The USI delegation comprised the following :

- (a) Lt Gen RN Kapur, PVSM, AVSM and Bar, DCIDS (DOT).
- (b) Lt Gen K Balaram, PVSM (Retd).
- (c) Lt Gen Chandra Shekhar, PVSM, AVSM, (Retd).
- (d) Lt Gen Vinay Shankar, PVSM, AVSM, VSM (Retd).
- (e) Lt Gen Satish Nambiar, PVSM, AVSM, VrC (Retd).

The Vietnamese delegation at the formal discussions comprised the following:

- (a) Senior Colonel Nguyen Dat Phong, Director IDIR.
- (b) Senior Colonel Phung Quang Tao, Deputy Director, IDIR.
- (c) Colonel Nguyen Van Hai, Deputy Director, IDIR (Attended the course at the Defence Services Staff College, Wellington (Nilgiris) in 1998).
- (d) Senior Colonel Nguyen Van Lich, Chief, Asia-Africa Department, IDIR.
- (e) Senior Colonel Le Van Mai, Senior Researcher, IDIR (Was Defence Attaché in Delhi in the late 1990s).

Visit Programme

The programme was short on professional content to the extent that only the 11 May 2006, was devoted to discussion of security issues. That afternoon there was a courtesy call on the Deputy Chief of the General Staff, Lt Gen Pham Hong Loi. The rest of the programme focused on visits to places of national importance and in conveying to the delegation an idea of what the country went through in achieving independence from the French and then in dealing with the operations conducted by the USA, and how the country is now coping. Given the fact that the IDIR is new to the whole process of institutional dialogue and that we were keen to set the process in motion, no attempt was made to impose any changes to the programme drawn up by the IDIR. Even so, since the Deputy of the Institute and a couple of other officers accompanied

us throughout the visit, it was possible to engage them in discussions on aspects of professional relevance from time to time. Many of the observations in succeeding paragraphs are the outcome of such informal inter-action. In the event, the visit was professionally satisfying, fruitful and educative.

An Introduction to IDIR

The formal part of the visit commenced with a briefing by Senior Colonel Nguyen Dat Phong, the Director of the Institute. On conclusion of that briefing, the Director USI gave a short brief on the USI. In the briefing on the USI special emphasis was placed on the training for UN peacekeeping operations conducted at the USI Centre for UN Peacekeeping as also the international stature it has achieved in keeping with India's acclaimed reputation in this field.

The IDIR is recent in origin in that it was set up only in 2003 to complement the activities of the 'Military Strategy Institute' whose head had visited the USI on 15 October 1997. Post 2003, the work related to 'internal aspects' of the Vietnamese Armed Forces in terms of evolving strategy, doctrine, higher defence organisation, and so on, is apparently being carried out by the Military Strategy Institute, while those related to 'strategic studies' and aspects related to 'defence and military diplomacy' are being carried out by IDIR.

The re-naming of the Institute (the original name being Defence Institute of International Relations), some time in 2004 was possibly due to some 'defining of turfs' between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Defence.

Despite being relatively new in origin the IDIR has made a beginning with dialogues with South Korea and Japan, and now India. Some of their researchers have participated in events attended by representatives from Australia, the USA, Japan, South Korea, Malaysia, Singapore, and so on. Officers from this Institute now, apparently provide inputs to their Ministry of Defence (MOD) for security dialogues. They also attend ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia-Pacific (CSCAP) and other security related meetings and seminars. Two officers who attended courses at the USI Centre for United Nations Peacekeeping in 2004-2005 are on the rolls of the Institute (One of them attended the discussions on 11 May 2006).

Officers at the IDIR are all serving Vietnamese Armed Forces officers. Most of the senior officers (Senior Colonels and Colonels) are former defence attaches or deputy defence attaches. Many have side-stepped from the General Staff Department-II. Whereas the Institute is apparently intended to be an autonomous "think-tank", it is in reality at present an institutionalised body providing researched inputs to the MOD for developing defence and security relations with other countries. It is one of the very few defence organisations that have been permitted to inter-act with foreign institutions and foreigners, independent of the 'External Relations Department'. The erstwhile Director of the Institute was a graduate of the National Defence College in Delhi and was a Defence Attaché in Delhi.

Regional Security Perspectives

Brief presentations on regional security perspectives were made by Senior Colonel Le Van Mai and Lt Gen Vinay Shankar on behalf of IDIR and USI respectively.

In the IDIR presentation and in the discussions that ensued, the following major points emerged:

- (a) In the last few years, SE Asia has generally remained stable, peaceful and dynamic in development. However, there are some uncertainties due to disputes over territories and resources as also non-traditional security issues.
- (b) Main dispute is over the territorial sovereignty in the East Sea- Spratly Islands between five countries (PRC, Vietnam, Brunei, Malaysia and the Philippines) and one 'territory' Taiwan. Besides its great strategic significance and rich natural resources, this is important economically and militarily not only to its littoral countries but also for many others. This remains a big challenge. There are also other territorial disputes.
- (c) Non-traditional security challenges include terrorism, piracy, drug trafficking, illegal migration and trans-national crime. These issues will be a big concern for the region and may cause uncertainties and endanger peace, cooperation and development. Separatist movements, ethnic and religious conflicts are also matter of concern.

(d) The US influence in the region is significant due to the fact that many nations in the region are in the early stages of development and are thirsty for induction of capital, science and technology, advanced management techniques, and markets for their goods. In addition, the USA has traditional military alliances with Thailand, Singapore and the Philippines, as a consequence of which it maintains troops in several military bases in these countries. In the foreseeable future the USA may be expected to enhance military relations with ASEAN nations and increase its role in the ARF. The US military presence in the region may ostensibly be for counter-terrorism but in the main and longer term it could well be for containing and restraining the Peoples Republic of China (PRC). The aspect of China's greater importance as an immediate neighbour was stressed as also the desire not to provoke either of the two powers.

(e) The influence of the PRC is unquestionable. It established relations with the countries of the region early and has become an important partner in ASEAN; in recent years in three areas: military, security-politics and culture-society. This heightened role is manifest in: trade between China and ASEAN, only \$ 7.9 bn in 1991 to \$ 39.5 bn in 2002, \$78 bn in 2003, \$82 bn in 2004 and a record \$ 130 bn in 2005; Chinese direct investment from \$ 62 mn in 1997 to \$ 225 mn in 2004; ASEAN has been the fifth biggest trading partner of China for ten years. ASEAN and China have signed a framework agreement on comprehensive economic cooperation including the establishment of a China-ASEAN Free Trade Area (CAFTA) by 2010. China has also signed a 'Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia'. In October 2003 China and ASEAN endorsed a joint statement on strategic partnership for peace and prosperity committed to counter terrorism. Though the Code of Conduct in the South China Sea (East Sea) between ASEAN and China is being drafted, the implementation of the Declaration of Conduct serves as an important base to ensure marine security and order. Notably, China is striving to develop comprehensive relations with ASEAN in order to compete with the USA and other nations in the region.

(f) Though Japan's role is not as significant as that of the USA and China, it is an important partner and holds a remarkable position in the region. As ASEAN's longest standing partner and having over 30 years of diplomatic relationship with the grouping, Japan's role is increasingly enhanced through cooperative relations with ASEAN in general and with each ASEAN member individually. Besides trade, Japan is strengthening its security role in SE Asia.

(g) Russia and India are also asserting their roles in SE Asia by participating in joint agreements. Two-way trade between India and ASEAN reached \$ 9 bn in 1997 and \$ 17.7 bn in 2004. Due to cooperative relationships, ASEAN members have also gained access to high technology sectors, energy, science, Information Technology (IT), culture, tourism and so on.

Implications of the Rise of China

Brief presentations were made by Senior Colonel Le Van Lich and Lt Gen Chandra Shekhar on behalf of IDIR and USI respectively.

In the IDIR presentation and the discussions that ensued, the following major points emerged :-

- (a) The 21st Century is unlikely to see conventional armed conflict like world wars but more of conflict based on religious, racial and territorial issues.
- (b) The Asia-Pacific is from China's point of view, a region where all its national vital interests exist and converge. It is also the place where competition between major powers takes place.
- (c) The first and foremost goal of China is to maintain stable relations with major powers. The second goal is to try and keep good relations with regional countries for fear of a US led alliance that may seek to contain and restrain China.
- (d) China is becoming an economic powerhouse in the region but it is also facing the challenge of how to persuade regional countries that Chinese economic development is not a threat to other countries but brings opportunities.

- (e) Political transitions appear smooth and stable.
- (f) China defines Asia as a region where it has an advantage of general influence and where China must create a dominant role for itself to help it rise to the status of a world power. The key Chinese strategic goal was assessed as becoming a strong and unified nation, a world power and a super power in Asia, and also a world-leading player in economics, politics and military by the middle of the 21st Century.
- (g) To implement its Asia strategy, China is likely to pursue the establishment of comprehensive cooperative relations or partnerships with all countries of the region; take all the responsibilities that it can to manifest its role as a 'responsible power'; accept the US role in the region and avoid confronting the USA; opening its domestic market, enhancing regional integration, sharing opportunities of development with regional countries; combine regional strategy with global strategy, promoting international activities.
- (h) In NE Asia, China seeks to enhance relations with Russia, South Korea and Mongolia and to improve relations with North Korea. China may be expected to work with others to prevent a 'new war' on the Korean peninsula. Another important intention in the sub-region is to establish a collective security system that eliminates the influence of the USA and Japan and weakens the US-Japan alliance.
- (i) In SE Asia, China will promote its traditional influence and use it as a springboard to become a world power. In this process it will take full advantage of the leverage of the overseas Chinese populations.
- (j) China has developed its relations with the Central Asian countries through the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) effectively to balance the USA in the region; enhance multi-polarisation; and to propel relations with Europe. China's role in the SCO is now quite central.
- (l) In South Asia, China has upgraded its relations with India to a strategic partnership as part of its general strategy to build a peaceful and stable surrounding environment for China to develop. Relations with Pakistan are being further enhanced. To pursue the 'Strategy of Exploitation of the Great West'

China may build a railroad from Xinjiang through Pakistan's borderline (within Pakistan's economic corridor) to shorten the geographical distance between China and the countries in the Persian Gulf, Arabian Sea and Africa; meanwhile it also helps to shorten the sea-lanes to European countries.

(m) While there are many factors that influence China's Asia strategy, the two primary ones are the US role that is seen as an effort at containment of China and the fact that the major powers of Asia like Russia, Japan and India have some suspicions about Chinese long-term intentions.

(n) One of the analysts interestingly observed that China has been 'taking advantage of Pakistan against India, just as it took advantage of Cambodia against Vietnam'.

(o) Two other interesting observations made were that "Prior to 1995, China focused its attention on the West, but after 1995, it turned towards the East, and is presently focused on improving relations with immediate neighbours, and follows a policy of peace and friendship. Chinese definition of neighbouring countries extends upto Middle East and Australia" and "After 2004, China is getting ready to have several joint military exercises including with India and Russia. They want to indicate that they are a giant military power".

General Observations on Strategic Aspects Based on Informal Inter-Action

An observation was made that the Taiwan and Korean issues are inter-linked; one cannot be solved without addressing the other.

Constant effort was required to balance the US pressures vis-a-vis interests with the Chinese. China's perception that the USA is trying to contain it is an obsession that has to be factored into all strategic calculations. Both are competing in Central and SE Asia. But China has the advantage of geographical proximity. It is, therefore, stepping up trade and investment in all SE Asian countries.

Japan's growing interest in a security role in the region was a matter of some significance. Japan is apparently investing considerably in various projects connected with infrastructure and general improvement of living conditions.

While indicating significant and growing Australian interest and investment in Vietnam, it was discreetly suggested that India rather than Australia should in fact be doing so.

South Korea has apparently evinced interest in upgrading equipment left behind by the US forces.

Relations with China are being managed rather well by Vietnam. The border demarcation has been settled on the 'watershed' principle and both sides claim the other has benefited. The Vietnamese do not want to unsettle relations with China and to that end, possibly made greater concessions.

Observations on Bilateral Issues

Given the excellent relations that exist between Vietnam and India due to India's unqualified support during Vietnam's struggle for independence, one would have imagined that there would have been much greater inter-action between Hanoi and New Delhi. However, indications during the visit suggest that Vietnam does not figure adequately on the radar screen in the relevant ministries of the Government of India; like External Affairs, Defence, Commerce, Industry, Cultural Affairs, Education, Science and Technology, etc. A sad commentary on our capacity to exploit the goodwill and interest that prevails in a country that is of so much importance strategically. .

Private investment by Indian corporate house appears to be marginal. Some incentives by the Government of India may be called for to encourage the process.

Conversations with our Vietnamese interlocutors indicated that there would be considerable scope for exploiting Indian expertise in English language training and information technology. The possibilities of establishing a tri-Service English training school could be explored; we may need to show some flexibility in meeting their requirements.

There was considerable interest in exploiting the Indian experience in peacekeeping including increased inter-action with the USI Centre for United Nations Peacekeeping. It appears that the Vietnamese authorities are still rather tentative and somewhat uncertain in their approach to the whole aspect of participation in international peace operations. Should they, however, decide in

favour of such participation, they may well seek assistance not only for such training but also in setting up training facilities in the country. It would be appropriate for us to not only be prepared to respond to any such request made, but to positively encourage moves towards this end during inter-action at various levels. For its part the USI delegation offered full cooperation to the extent possible.

The IDIR delegation as also the Deputy Chief of the General Staff evinced keen interest in continuation of the dialogue between the two institutions on aspects of mutual interest on a regular basis. There was also mutual agreement on periodic exchange of research scholars on a reciprocal basis.

The visit was without doubt an unqualified success. While thanking our Vietnamese hosts for the utility of the dialogue and for their kindness and hospitality, the USI delegation extended an invitation to the IDIR to send a delegation to the USI for a continuation of the dialogue either in end 2006 or early 2007 at the mutual convenience of the two institutions.

ADDRESS UPDATE

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