

Report on USI Delegation Visit to Vietnam

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Background

The Institute for Defence International Relations (IDIR) of Vietnam and United Service Institution of India (USI) have bilateral arrangements for periodic interaction. The first USI Delegation visited the IDIR from 10 to 15 May 2006. Ever since, the two Institutions have come a long way with regular exchange of visits and participation in seminars. A USI Delegation comprising the following visited Vietnam from 02 to 07 October 2011 :-

- (a) Major General Youdishter Kumar Gera (Retd), Leader
- (b) Shri Sudarshan Kumar Bhutani, IFS (Retd)
- (c) Commander Sandeep Dewan, Research Fellow, USI

Programme

The visit programme was well balanced. Professional discussions on strategic and security issues were held at IDIR and Institute for Strategic Study (IDS) on 03-04 Oct 2011. The USI delegation also called on the Deputy Minister of Defence Lieutenant General Nguyen Chi Vinh and visited places of historical significance.

Seminar at IDIR

Senior Colonel Yu Tien Trong, Director IDIR welcomed the USI Delegation at the Seminar on "Security Issues and Co-operation in Asia Pacific : the Rising of China and India; the Role of the ASEAN". He stated that the Seminar was part of a continuing engagement between the two Institutions to discuss common security concerns of India and Vietnam, and to develop a nuanced appreciation of complementarities and points of convergence. The Seminar was conducted in three sessions to cover: 'Relations between Major Entities' ; 'The Rise of China and Implications for Asia Pacific Regional Security' and 'The US-China Relations and Challenges for the ASEAN'. Recognising the role that India and Vietnam would be required to play in the promotion of regional security, it was necessary that both the countries take further steps to develop their bilateral defence and security ties. In that context, this visit of the USI Delegation assumed even greater importance.

Opening Remarks by Leader of USI Delegation. Vietnam and India have a long and traditional friendship. Top leadership of both countries interact regularly through high level visits. Dialogue between the two Institutions provides a good opportunity to exchange views on contemporary issues and to review long term perspective of the global, regional and sub-regional developments. Both, Vietnam and India, have been developing at a very good pace over the past decades. Vietnam has excellent law and order situation, good governance and political stability. The Vietnamese Armed Forces are respected and admired for their military successes in wars with France (1946-1954), with the USA (1965-1975) and with China (1979). During my earlier visit to Vietnam in June 1987, as a member of the National Defence College Team, detailed briefing about the Vietnamese operations against China was given. The Team was taken to the area of military operations and was very impressed with the layout of the Vietnamese defences. Some disabled Chinese tanks were seen strewn around on the battleground. The impression gathered by us was that the Vietnamese Forces had displayed tremendous valour, grit and determination.

Relations between Major Entities. Three presentations were made in the first session: "Look East Policy and India - ASEAN Relations" by Major General YK Gera (Retd) of USI; "Vietnam-India Relations : Situation and Challenges" by Professor Dr Ngo Xuan Binh, Director Institute of India and West Asian Studies, Institute of Social Science; and "China-ASEAN Relations" by Professor Dr Nguyen Thu My, Institute of China Studies. The following points emerged during presentations and discussions:-

- (a) India's 'Look East Policy' was initially directed towards the South-East Asian nations. It started as an economic initiative but has gained political and security significance as well. China, Japan and South Korea were added to the geographic ambit later.
- (b) The crux of the policy is to leverage 'Strategic Dynamics' in the shifting balance of global-economic equilibrium in the region. It envisages the ASEAN States, Japan and South Korea as key partners in Asia.
- (c) India's efforts to improve relations with China have received lukewarm response.
- (d) Close to 33 per cent of India's trade comes from this region. There has been a surge in trade. In 2007, trade figures were US\$ 15.06 billion which have jumped to US \$ 60 billion approx.
- (e) During the last few years, South East 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.
- (f) Main dispute in East Asia is over the territorial sovereignty of Spratly and Paracel Islands: among China, Vietnam, Brunei, Malaysia and the Philippines. Besides its great strategic significance and rich natural resources, the area is important both economically and militarily.
- (g) Non-traditional security challenges include terrorism, piracy, drug trafficking, illegal migration and transnational crime. These issues may endanger peace, cooperation and development.
- (h) China was quick to establish relations with the countries of the Region to become an important partner. China and

ASEAN have established Free Trade Area (CAFTA). China also has a 'Treaty of Amity and Co-operation' in SE Asia. China is striving to develop comprehensive relations with ASEAN in order to compete with the USA and other nations in the Region. For more than a decade, ASEAN has been the 'fifth biggest trading partner' of China. Trade between ASEAN and China accounts for more than US \$ 130 billion.

(j) China, India and ASEAN are set to become the world's largest economic bloc. The grouping is expected to account for 27 per cent of global GDP and is likely to overtake the EU and USA economies in the near future.

(k) The 10 ASEAN countries include: Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam. ASEAN 'Plus 6' grouping is symptomatic of the evolving geopolitics of the Region. From security angle, inclusion of India, USA, Russia, Japan, China and South Korea provides checks and balances in the Eastern Ocean.

(l) Japan's role is expanding through co-operative relations with ASEAN in general and with ASEAN members individually. Japan has 35 years of diplomatic relationship with the ASEAN grouping. Besides economics and trade, Japan is strengthening its security role in SE Asia.

The Rise of China and Its Implications. The three presentations in this session were: "South China Sea Situation and Vietnam's View Point" by Ambassador Chin from Ministry of Foreign Affairs; "The Rising of China and the Implications to the Security of Asia Pacific Region" by Professor Dr Nguyen Huy Quy, Deputy Director of Institute of China Studies, Institute of Social Science; and "India-China Relations: The Present and Future" by Shri SK Bhutani, IFS (Retd) of USI. The following points emerged during this session:-

(a) Asia-Pacific is the region, from China's point of view, where all its vital national interests exist and converge. It also attracts competition between major powers.

(b) China is becoming an economic powerhouse. Its challenge lies in persuading the regional countries to understand that Chinese economic development is not a threat to them, but it brings in opportunities for their progress also.

(c) Towards the end of 2003 and early 2004, senior leaders of the Communist Party of China (CPC) studied the rise of great powers in history, noting the destructive inventory of conflicts that proved to be the engines of supremacy from the 15th century onwards. Central theme of their examination, that emerged, was: 'Could China dominate without recourse to arms?' Unfortunately, in reality China has shown no propensity to establish cooperative stabilising arrangements as reflected by recent happenings.

(i) In March 2010, North Korea sank a South Korean warship - China failed to condemn it.

(ii) Reassertion of China's claims to the Spratly and Paracel islands.

(iii) Sovereignty over virtually the entire South China sea. This conundrum continues to bring together like-minded states into countervailing security arrangements.

(iv) Non resolution of the Sino-Indian boundary dispute and the Sino-Pakistan nuclear tie-up, both in weapons and civil fields, further pushes the relations downhill. Strategists have predicted Sino-Indian relationship to be one of rivalry, as both powers are developing their Comprehensive National Power (CNP) through economic development at a rate of close to 10 per cent.

(d) Impact of globalisation and sweeping surge of nationalism has helped China to formulate an affordable military strategy and developing asymmetric weapons called "The Assassin's Mace". It is a war fighting strategy, to develop capabilities designed to give advantage to a technologically inferior military over a technologically superior adversary. This unorthodox strategy has set into motion the modernisation process of PLA forces.

(e) China's military doctrine and operational capabilities have been developed during the last decade and a half. China's investments in cyber warfare, anti-air, anti-ship and anti-carrier weapons, nuclear submarines, nuclear powered attack submarines, aircraft carrier group Shi Lang (ex Varyag) with SU-30s, all make for a force that is lethal and enhanced in reach.

(f) China's infrastructure development, from Sittwe and Aungmye in Myanmar; Hambantota in Sri Lanka; Maroofa in the Maldives and Gwadar in Pakistan ('String of Pearls') would give teeth to the long range access denial within the Third Island Chain.

(g) Technology has placed disproportionate destructive power in the hands of Non State Actors. Pakistan is the fountainhead of terrorism and emergence of Islamic Jihadi groups. China's involvement with maverick nations such as Pakistan and North Korea does not enthuse confidence for prospects of a stable future in the Region.

The US-China Relations and Challenges for the ASEAN. Three presentations were programmed for the last session. However, due to paucity of time, only one paper "The US-China Relations : Opportunities and Challenges for ASEAN" by Mr Nguyen Hung Son, Deputy Director of Institute for Foreign Policy and Strategic Studies, Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam was presented. The following points emerged during the presentation and discussion:-

(a) China's first goal is to maintain stable relations with the USA and major powers; the second, is to keep good relations with regional countries - for fear of a US led alliance that may seek to contain and restrain China.

(b) China's perception that the USA is trying to contain it is an obsession that has to be factored into all strategic calculations by the ASEAN countries. Both are competing in SE Asia. But China has the advantage of geographical proximity. China is, therefore, stepping up trade and investment in all SE Asian countries.

(c) The USA and China enjoy good economic relations. However, the American posture in the South China Sea may lead to conflict, given the strategic links that the USA enjoys with Japan, South Korea, Taiwan and other littoral states of this Region.

(d) The US influence in the ASEAN Region is significant. The USA has traditional military alliances with Thailand, Singapore and Philippines and maintains troops in several military bases in these countries. The US military presence in the Region may ostensibly be for Global War on Terror (GWOT) but it could well be for containing and restraining China. 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.

IDS-USI Bilateral Meeting

Lieutenant General Tran Thai Binh, Director, IDS led a team of five officers from his Institute. He mentioned that erstwhile Military Strategy Institute had been recently renamed as 'Institute for Defence Strategy'. He welcomed the USI Delegation for bilateral interaction and talked about the existing informal bilateral interaction arrangements between the IDS and the USI. He was looking forward to the signing of the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between the two Institutions for further cementing this relationship and generating a spirit of better understanding and co-operation.

Leader of the USI Delegation thanked the Director, IDS and mentioned that the aim of the interaction was to discuss contemporary issues and promote mutual understanding and cooperation. He reiterated that he was also looking forward to signing of the MoU between the two Institutions. Salient points of the discussion held at the IDS are given in the succeeding paras.

Review of Global and Regional Security

Senior Colonel Dzung Kim Le, Director Department of International Studies in his brief rundown on Global and Regional Security issues stated that the USA, sole global power, was on the decline. However, the decline was likely to be very gradual and China would take a long time to become a world power, if it continued to rise peacefully. However, he mentioned that time alone would tell if its rise in fact turned out to be peaceful. He also mentioned that India was also a rising power and hoped that India would soon become a Permanent Member of the UN Security Council. Vietnam on its part would support India's case for permanent membership of the Security Council.

Regional security in the Asia Pacific during the last decade or so had been stable and peaceful. However, with reassertion of claim by China to the Spratly and Paracel islands; and sovereignty over virtually the entire South China Sea; the tension in the Region had gone up. Efforts were on to resolve the issue diplomatically, but the same was likely to be a long drawn battle of wits and nerves. He talked of existing good Vietnam-India relations. He appreciated the firm stand taken by Indian ONGC Videsh's Oil Exploration Vessel (September 2011) when challenged by China and added that the vessel was clearly in Vietnam EEZ Waters.

The speaker raised the issue of requirement of English teaching instructors for imparting education in Vietnam. Currently, Australia was helping Vietnam in the field of education. He suggested that India could help Vietnam in this field.

Within ASEAN countries, tension between Laos and Cambodia continues. No satisfactory solution to their contentious issue was in sight.

The USI delegation leader stated that problems affecting most of the nations today were: multifaceted terrorism, sea piracy, money laundering, drug trafficking, natural disasters, climate change, environmental degradation, health pandemics and so on. These problems are generally beyond the capability of a single nation to resolve and call for genuine cooperation between nations. Certain problems were best resolved regionally pooling in expertise, resources, information and intelligence. With problems now taking on a formidable and, in certain cases, a sinister dimension; like piracy, sky rocketing oil prices, WMD proliferation, nuclear terrorism, and so on; a re-look had become imperative. Their adverse fall out would affect more than one nation and perhaps the entire region. Thus, it was incumbent upon all those who were part of a regional entity to resolve all such issues in a spirit of sincere cooperation beyond narrow partisan interests.

Responding to the issues raised by members of the IDS team, he agreed with the perception that China would take quite some time to catch up and overtake the USA as the sole superpower. The USA would do its best to prolong her present status for as long as possible. He thanked the IDS team for supporting Permanent Seat for India in the UN Security Council. Regarding assistance in educational field, efforts would be made to provide all possible support.

At this stage a Memorandum of Understanding between IDS and USI was signed and documents exchanged.

Courtesy Call on the Deputy Minister of Defence

On 04 October 2011, at 1600 hrs, the USI delegation made a courtesy call on the Deputy Minister of Defence, Lieutenant General Nguyen Chi Vinh. He raised the following points:-

(a) **Research.** There is need for better co-operation between Vietnamese and Indian Institutions in selected areas of security. This could take the form of exchange of research scholars for short durations; joint papers; publication of articles in each other's journals and other publications. Exchange of views, participation in joint seminars and other academic activities will go a long way in keeping abreast and covering new ground.

(b) **UN Peacekeeping Operations.** Vietnam Armed Forces are likely to participate in UN Peacekeeping operations. There is a requirement of training and re-orientation for them before they are sent on such assignments. They want help from India in this field. Instructors from India could come to Vietnam for imparting training.

(c) **Educational Training.** For teaching English, Australia is providing help by providing instructors. We also seek help from India in this field.

Leader of the USI Delegation assured the Deputy Minister of National Defence, Socialist Republic of Vietnam that all possible efforts would be made to ensure that the needful was done expeditiously.

Visit to Places of Historical Significance

The War Remnants Museum. The War Remnants Museum is a museum in Hanoi that primarily contains exhibits related to the American phase of the Vietnam War. Operated by the Vietnamese Government, the Museum was opened in September 1975 as “The House for Displaying War Crimes of American Imperialism and the Puppet Government of South Vietnam.” Later it was known as the ‘Museum of American War Crimes’, then as the ‘War Crimes Museum’ until 1993. Its current name follows liberalisation in Vietnam and the normalisation of relations with the USA.

The Ho Chi Minh Museum. The Ho Chi Minh Museum is located in Hanoi, Vietnam. It is dedicated to the great Vietnamese leader Ho Chi Minh and Vietnam’s revolutionary struggle against foreign powers. It was constructed in the 1990s.

The Halong Bay. Halong Bay, literally meaning the “Descending Dragon Bay” in Vietnamese, is a UNESCO World Heritage Site, and a popular travel destination. The Bay features thousands of limestone karsts and isles in various sizes and shapes. Halong Bay is a centre of a larger zone which includes Bai Tu Long Bay to the northeast, and Cat Ba islands to the southwest. These zones share similar geological, geographical, geomorphological, cultural characters and climate. Halong Bay has an area of around 1,553 sq kms, including 1,960 islets, most of which are limestone. The limestone in this bay, according to a guide, has gone through 500 million years of formation in different conditions and environments. Halong Bay is home to 14 endemic floral species and 60 endemic faunal species.

The Tunnels of Cu Chi. The tunnels of Cu Chi form an immense network of connecting underground tunnels located in the Cu Chi district of Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon), Vietnam. It is part of a much larger network of tunnels underlining most of the country. The tunnels of Cu Chi Complex was the area of several military campaigns during the Vietnam War, and was the Viet Cong’s base of operations for the Tet Offensive in 1968. The tunnels were used by Viet Cong guerrillas as hiding spots during combat, as well as serving as communication and supply routes, hospitals, food and weapon caches and living quarters for numerous guerrilla fighters. The tunnel systems were of great importance to the Viet Cong in their resistance to American forces, through which they secured American withdrawal from Vietnam and ultimate military success.

Reunification Palace. Reunification Palace, formerly known as Independence Palace, built on the site of the former Norodom Palace, is a landmark in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. It was designed by architect Ngo Viet Th   and was the home and workplace of the President of South Vietnam during the Vietnam War. It was the site of the end of the Vietnam War during the Fall of Saigon on 30 April 1975, when a North Vietnamese Army tank crashed through its gates. In November 1975, after the negotiation convention between the communist North Vietnam and their colleagues in South Vietnam was completed, the Provisional Revolutionary Government renamed it as Reunification Palace.

Overall Impressions

Vietnamese officials exude an air of confidence – a result of successful but protracted armed struggle for Independence in the second half of the last century. First, the French were defeated in their attempt to restore Colonial rule. Then, the USA attempted to deny victory to the Viet Minh led by Ho Chi Minh in order to prevent Vietnam from being ruled by Communists. The end result was quite the contrary: all of Indochina - Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia, came to be ruled by the Communists. The end of protracted wars in 1979, allowed Vietnam to focus its energies on economic reconstruction and development. Vietnam today is a major exporter of rice, rubber, coffee, and cashew. Light industry has been developed with foreign capital. Singapore and Taiwan are major investors. Indian investment is welcomed.

The Vietnamese are conscious of the pressure China has exerted throughout history. In contemporary era, the pressure relates to maritime boundary. China occupied (by force) the Paracels under the control of South Vietnamese regime, when that regime collapsed in 1972. Vietnam challenged the occupation forcefully. The Chinese prevailed but Vietnam refused to legally concede the occupation. The maritime dispute now extends to whole of South China Sea. China’s claim to the Sea and the islands therein, has been collectively contested by the ASEAN. China’s attempt to deal individually with ASEAN states has been resisted. Military pressure employed recently by China, has allowed foreign powers to contest China’s claim. The USA, Japan, India and Australia have supported ASEAN nations.

Vietnam and the Philippines have borne the brunt of Chinese military and political pressure. Vietnam has successfully mobilised support from the USA, Japan and India. The Vietnamese leaders have travelled to several countries in recent weeks. The Prime Minister visited Uzbekistan, a member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), and Ukraine (a significant supplier of military hardware to China) in September. The President travelled to Russia and was scheduled to visit India in mid-October. The Prime Minister subsequently visited Japan and secured Japanese investment in a Nuclear power station and exploration of ‘rare earth’ materials. It may be recalled China had denied export of such materials to Japan after a clash on sea involving Chinese and Japanese ships. To keep channels of communication open, the Vietnamese Communist Party leader travelled to China in mid-October. While the dispute lingers on, it is hoped that the tensions will ease and no armed confrontation will take place. It is unlikely China will drop its claims and is no mood to seek a compromise at present.

On the situation in the region, Vietnamese officials acknowledged the domestic political stand-off in Thailand and mentioned the secession problem in Southern Thailand. They hoped that the new Thai government would settle the boundary dispute with Cambodia. On Burma, no views were expressed by the officials.

India’s relations with the USA generated a detailed review. It was explained that India and the USA shared

common values even when there were policy disagreements. Post-Cold War, the two countries had moved closer. People of Indian origin occupied political and administrative positions in the US federal and state governments. There was a constant exchange of views and coordination of positions on international issues. India's role in East, Southeast and West Asia was recognised. Asked whether Pakistan was an obstacle in relations, the answer was 'no'. Rather, Pakistan's sponsorship of terrorism has become a common concern of both. Pakistan was a factor in Sino-Indian relations. China was generous with military supplies to Pakistan, but civilian aid was left to the US and other Western states. China was motivated by a desire to stymie India's relations with its South Asian neighbours. History, culture, belief in rule of law and democratic institutions, limited China's attempts to exploit disparity in size of the South Asian states, to its own advantage.

China was discussed at some length. Our counterparts stressed the giant strides made by China in economic and military sphere. Our attempt to draw attention to the negative international reaction to China's current economic strategy and the long-term consequences of social policy (e.g., one child norm), did not elicit any response. The rise in expenditure to maintain social stability and control dissent elicited no response. Neither side raised the issue of unrest in the minority provinces of China.

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Journal of the United Service Institution of India, Vol. CXLI, No. 586, October-December 2011.