

India and Indo-China : A Strategic Engagement

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Historical Perspective

The Indo-China region, comprising of Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos, lies at the geographical centre of ASEAN group of countries. While these countries may form part of the CLMV countries and are poor cousins in the ASEAN fraternity, their cultural traditions are as ancient as anywhere else in this region. The rich history of this region can boast of mighty kingdoms like the Khmer Empire (present day Cambodia), Champa kingdom and Dai Viet kings (present day Vietnam) and the Fa Nguyen Dynasty (present day Laos, correct name – Lao PDR). The Indo-China peninsula used to be a link between India and China in olden days. When traders set sail from India for China, they had to halt in this region for a couple of months for winds to change direction, so that they could set sail further Northwards towards China. Thus, a number of trading settlements had sprung up since First Century AD in the Southern part of Vietnam, which was also known as Cochin-China. While the dominant cultural historical influence in Cambodia is from India, Vietnam was influenced more by China and Laos.

In the late 19th Century, the French made inroads into Indo-China and took over all territory East of Mekong river from Siamese control. To the French, the importance of Laos and Cambodia was more as a buffer between the UK, Burma and Thailand and the economically important Annam and Tonkin (Vietnam). Subsequently, Indo-Chinese resistance against the colonial power of Imperial France gave way to a prolonged war against the USA, in which Laos was inextricably drawn in. Later, the play for influence by China and Vietnam over Laos and Cambodia led to Vietnam ousting the Chinese backed Khmer Rouge from power in Cambodia. This gave rise to a web of regional linkages and power play, with the Chinese shadow looming large as an extra regional player. Realising the strategic importance of the region and the economic potential, the USA too has started taking keen interest in the region in recent years.

Contemporary Dynamics

Vietnam

Having been subjugated for over 900 years by China, which also left an indelible impression on its culture, Vietnam has been attempting to maintain its independent existence and even fought a border war with China in 1979. Both countries also have disputed claims over island territories in South China Sea (called East Sea in Vietnam). Although, relations are on an upswing now with land boundary settled and a rapid expansion in trade and economic cooperation between the two taking place with China assisting Vietnam actively, yet Vietnam is also wary and cautious while accepting the assistance and investment from its Northern neighbour. After being re-elected in April 2006, the General Secretary Nong Duc Manh made his first overseas visit to China. This may be seen as part of steps Vietnam has been taking to reassure the Chinese over growing ‘closeness’ with the USA, which has made significant strides during recent years. While the last four years have seen an annual exchange of visits by Head of State/Head of Government between the two countries, including that of President George Bush in Nov 2006, yet, relations with the USA can be described as tentative, at best.

Laos

Forever the buffer zone, the French had no interest in developing this land locked country. It still continues to hold similar importance for China and Vietnam. For the present, it is more under Vietnamese influence. After being elected in April 2006, the present President and General Secretary, Mr Choummaly Sayasone visited Vietnam before visiting China, as if to put things in correct perspective. However, it accepts all possible aid from China and Vietnam. Estrangement, in military to military relations, between the USA and Laos ended last year and both countries have recently exchanged Defence Attaches. China is biding its time and hopes to gain more influence in Laos once the present generation of leaders (who, alongwith Vietnam participated in the war against imperialist powers) is replaced by the younger generation. The once turbulent border with Thailand is completely peaceful now. As to its Southern neighbour, there is neither discord nor significant trade with Cambodia.

Cambodia

One of the poorest countries in the world with a tenuous political dynamics, presently Vietnam wields great influence with the Government, despite not being very popular amongst large sections of population. China is assisting and investing heavily in Cambodia, which is likely to only get enhanced consequent to the recent discovery of offshore oil in the South. This has also brought American oil giants like Chevron (they are even funding expansion of Sihanoukville Port), and neighbours like Vietnam and Thailand have agreed for joint exploration in disputed waters, pending agreements on the issue.

China

While Indo-China does not include China, any study on the former would be incomplete without the latter, such is the strength of ‘presence’ and influence that it wields in the region. Forever the big brother, China is pumping money in all three countries and is also seeking to find outlets for its products through the ports of Vietnam and Cambodia into ASEAN markets by assisting in development of road infrastructure leading from its border points through Vietnam and Laos. Today, with China widely perceived as a rising power that could eventually gain a decisive political, economic and military position throughout the region, there are many Asian and ASEAN nations

hastening to accommodate Chinese power, countries of Indo-China region being no exception.

India and Indo-china

India's cultural influence over the region since ancient times is undeniable. Buddhism is the pre-dominant religion in all three countries. Commonality of a colonial past, our support to their struggle for independence and our leaning towards the Soviet Bloc during cold war has only brought us closer. The only two countries to have fought border wars with China are India and Vietnam. India and Vietnam are natural allies with no conflict of interest, whatsoever. India was the Chairman of International Commission for Supervision and Control (ICSC) and oversaw the transition of power in Indo-China pursuant to the Geneva Accord in 1954. Genuine trust and rapport between peoples and leaders dates back to our support during Vietnamese struggle for independence and later during Cambodian imbroglio, when they were totally isolated. Vietnam was one of the first countries to recognise Bangladesh and also supported India after first Pokhran experiment. Owing to our continuous support to each other in various international fora, India enjoys tremendous goodwill in the region.

Vietnam

Within Indo-China region, there can be no two views on primacy of Vietnam from the standpoint of influence it wields in the region, strategic location, as also the economic growth potential. It may be prudent therefore, to focus more on Vietnam, before turning our attention towards its other two neighbours. Enumerated in succeeding paras are the significant reasons that dictate why it makes strategic sense to engage with Vietnam more than others.

Vietnam is slowly emerging as a key player in the South East Asian security landscape. Vietnam's membership of UN Security Council, NAM, APEC, ASEAN and the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) has provided it with access to key multilateral institutions in the Asia Pacific, and the connected leverages.

On the economic front, Vietnam has, for the past decade, consistently posted a GDP growth rate of over eight per cent (except in 2008, it was 6.23 per cent, in keeping with the global economic recession). Yet, a darling of foreign investors, Vietnam had netted FDI of US \$ 64 billion in 2008, despite the economic slowdown.

Vietnam has a 3200 km long coastline, the whole length of which has to be coasted along by the South China Fleet, based in the island of Hainan that lies off the Gulf of Tonkin, in the South China Sea. Can India afford to have such a coastline as inimical or even indifferent? The corollary should be obvious. As the Chinese Navy moves towards acquiring a blue water capability, our engagement with Vietnam on this front can be nothing short of strategic. With an ageing fleet, Vietnam Peoples Navy (VPN) is rather modest today. They are looking to modernise its Navy and Air Force on higher priority, as threats loom more in the maritime dimension and the island territories. The stakes have been raised with the discovery of oil in the disputed sea bed. VPN is looking towards its trusted friend India for advice and assistance, and we must not disappoint, lest the space is filled up by others.

There is another very significant reason why India must engage with Vietnam with due urgency and depth (i.e at all levels). China shares its land borders with 14 countries, and has managed to resolve its boundary disputes with almost all of them, the only exceptions being India and Bhutan. of course, China continues to have maritime boundary disputes with a number of countries on its Eastern flank. We have unresolved land borders issues with China in Ladakh, Himachal Pradesh & Arunachal Pradesh, in addition to territory ceded by Pakistan to China. Vietnam and China have a dispute in maritime boundaries in Hoang Sa (Spratly islands) and Truong Sa (Paracel Islands). Although the island territories have four other claimants - Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei and Taiwan - but China and Vietnam remain the major players with biggest claims and maximum possessions. Hence, information sharing with a common aim between India and Vietnam may be a matter of prudence, more so as recent and historical trends show that China is in no hurry to resolve these issues with both countries - for obvious reasons.

Vietnam has the largest standing army in South-East Asia. While the army has a formidable reputation, it is equipped with outdated armament and equipment, which needs upgradation. Vietnam is very soon acquiring economic muscle to modernise its Armed Forces. While budgetary allocations for defence in Vietnam remain shrouded in mystery, there is a definite potential for our defence industry, a field where trust between both countries is a significant factor.

If the extra interest being evinced by the USA, in Vietnam and the region, can be read as an indicator of the American desire to involve Vietnam in its strategic equation with China, there will only be a convergence of interests there.

Cambodia and Laos

Cambodia and Laos, have historical and cultural ties with India that are stronger and longer than with Vietnam. There are strong cultural and religious influences from India since the days when Hinduism and Buddhism spread to the region. Any cultural show in both these countries is incomplete without an episode of Ramayana. In present times, our involvement in overseeing implementation of the Geneva Accord of 1954 by heading ICSC, by deploying an infantry battalion in Cambodia upto 1970, and mutual support in various international fora have earned India much goodwill and trust. Bilateral relations with both these countries, including defence cooperation, have witnessed a quantum jump in the recent years. They are also our potential strategic allies, more or less on similar lines as Vietnam. Laos is a land-locked country, strategically located between China, Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam. Cambodian shores are an extension of the Vietnamese coast line, the strategic importance of which has already been highlighted.

The Way Ahead

Look East Policy

India is predicted (Goldman Sachs, and others) to be in the top three economies of the world by 2050. We need to accept the reality of expectations that smaller countries have of India, in playing a role in regional affairs. Only after an overt acceptance of this fact, can we think of articulating a vision of our role. Our 'Look East Policy' is a pragmatic policy decision to help us retain the rightful balance of power in Asia. Under this, however, it will be prudent to accord more focus to Indo-China region as a distinct sub set of ASEAN region. The paradigm of Indo-China and other ASEAN countries is somewhat different. Not only are the three countries of the Indo-China region our natural allies, they also have potential of becoming our strategic partners. This may call for a long term investment without hoping for immediate returns.

Strategic Partnership

In July 2007, an Agreement on Strategic Partnership was signed in Delhi between the Prime Ministers of India and Vietnam. Defence cooperation agreement was signed with Laos in 2002 and with Cambodia in 2007. These and other such agreements can be the enabling instruments to enhance engagement with these three countries. Since the Armed Forces play a pre-eminent role in the polity and governance of all three countries, it will be prudent to use military-diplomacy as a tool to enhance our engagement. Creating favourable conditions on a long strategic coastline, of mainly Vietnam and partly Cambodia, should be a natural priority. Information sharing with common interests between India and Vietnam has a potential dynamics of its own. Goodwill and trust that India enjoys in the region should also be translated into something more tangible. Although we are engaging the region already, but there is still a huge potential waiting to be tapped.

Trade

Such engagement cannot be on one plane alone. On the economic front, our bilateral trade with all three countries has grown manifold in the recent years, touching US \$ 3 billion in 2008 with Vietnam alone. (India has concluded a Free Trade Agreement with the ten members ASEAN on 13 Aug 2009). This opportunity should be seized with both hands to increase trade and hence, linkages and influence in the region.

Conclusion

Countries that aspire to play a role in regional affairs must articulate a firm policy. Although a 'String of Pearls' works for China and the USA continues with its involvement in the Middle East, and both countries invest in a 'frontline' Pakistan; yet, it may still be presumptuous for India to articulate a policy at that level. However, formulating a role for itself in the regional architecture would be prudent, in which multiple engagement should be the new mantra. However, a pragmatic underscoring of engagement with closer allies and strategic partners should be considered a viable option. Indo-China is one such region, as a potential strategic ally. On a pragmatic note, a convergence of interests with the USA should only help us move in the right direction - eastwards. Recent border developments with China should only serve to re-inforce such a course of action.

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