

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.

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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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