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India, Vietnam in the Indo-Pacific: A Unifying Construct

Pankaj K Jha

Abstract

Is Indo-Pacific the one overarching forum, evolving from a geo-political imagination which can bring the two countries closer? If it be so, then what are the avenues and possibilities that exist in the Indo-Pacific sphere for India and Vietnam, and what are the benefits and drawbacks of subscription to such a concept? Will it be feasible enough to sustain the aspirations as well as concerns of the two countries or there is a need for returning back to basics, and entrust ASEAN with the centrality which is required for the peace and security in the larger Asia-Pacific region. Is China a necessary evil or is it being demonised by the western media? What could be the contours of the evolving geo-political order when alternatives such as BRICS, SCO and Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank have been getting attention and subscription from countries across the Europe, Africa and Asia? Has regionalism lost sheen, and bilateralism is the only way to deal with larger security and political issues. This paper would address these issues and look for possibilities with regard to India and Vietnam cooperating

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in the geo-political, and geo-strategic construct which is now known as Indo-Pacific.

One of the biggest questions that linger in the minds of the decision-makers is whether Indo-Pacific would be the future of strategic discourse or if it will expand its horizons to include economics, culture and people to people interactions under its ambit. It seems pertinent to deliberate on the evolution of regional constructs, and how it defines regional multilateralism. Whenever there has been a discussion on the issue of security in the Asia-Pacific region, Vietnam appears to be located at a good vantage point. Australia has to focus its interest in the North, given its location in the Southern Hemisphere. However, it has been discounted as a major player owing to its relatively small population, and the increasing umbilical attachment to the West. Few erstwhile British colonies still profess England's Queen Elizabeth as the titular head of the country instead of declaring itself as a republic. Southeast Asia which used to be a priority area during the Second World War, lost its relevance due to a struggle between two major powers representing two different ideologies and the withdrawal of the British from the theatre after colonial powers were uprooted from the region. The Second World War highlighted the rise of Asian power primarily Japan and the expanse that it can achieve unhindered, given the limited resistance capacity of the allied powers.

In the early 1920s Karl Haushofer, a German strategic thinker propounded the 'Indo-Pacific', as conceptualised. This construct was more conversant with the marine biologists who have been studying the migratory patterns and also movement of marine organisms as well as contiguous ecology across the Indian and Pacific oceans. The botanists, geologists and anthropologists have been working on gene sampling and the physical features of the Pacific islanders; wanted to geographically map their migration patterns from Asia and other continents including

Africa over long periods of time. This has helped in drawing linkages between civilisations across the Indo-Pacific region. However, in the geopolitical discourse, it had not garnered the expected attention. The ‘Indo-Pacific’ construct gained political currency in the late 2000s when it was felt that Asia-Pacific need to include India and the Indian Ocean to be more inclusive and create a cooperative sphere between democracies and like-minded nations. It is now widely resonating as the fulcrum of new geopolitical realities.¹

Many geographic regions have flexible geopolitical boundaries. As a result of this, sub-regions such as the Greater Mekong sub-region, Bay of Bengal community and even emergence of selective membership organisations such as BRICS which includes Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa have defied all logic related to regionalism which has been more geographically based. BRICS as an *a la Carte* institution depicted the structures based on economic priorities, geopolitical compulsions and as an alternative to western regionalism concepts. As a result, geography more particularly political geography gained subscription and evolved as a new stream of study in global politics. The political geography has anchored itself taking a cue from classical geopolitics and critical geopolitics. In the two cases of geopolitics, the latitude and longitude become irrelevant, and are replaced by the perceptual position and perception regarding the other emerging powers.²

Karl Haushofer in his discourse referred to the Indopazifischen Raum “Indo-Pacific region/space” as the fusion of the two regional constructs and buttressed the fact that “the geographic impact of the dense Indo-Pacific concentration of humanity and cultural empire of India and China, which ... are geographically sheltered behind the protective veil of the offshore island arcs” of the western Pacific and Bay of Bengal, offshore island arcs through which they are now both actively and competitively deploying.³ Furthermore, the trade and cultural routes between the Indian and Pacific Oceans had been reflected in the archaeological studies

and historical data. The new construct of Indo-Pacific has relatively more Oceanic orientation in comparison to Asia-Pacific but also in rediscovering, forging and strengthening cultural and historical links between the mainland and island communities. The debate over the viability and utility of the Asia-Pacific and Indo-Pacific has been widely debated but for both India and Vietnam, Indo-Pacific seems more appropriate because it is inclusive of both the countries as equal stakeholders and also integrates the two into the emerging geopolitical calculations.

India's Act East Policy and Vietnam's Asia Policy

India's Act East policy incubated from the basic fundamentals of the Look East Policy in which the attempt was to engage the countries of Southeast Asia both at the bilateral level and also through multilateral organisations linked to ASEAN and also working on a common economic integration which has been undertaken through platforms such as Regional Comprehensive Economic Cooperation (RCEP) involving ASEAN nations and six dialogue partners. If one looks at the Act East policy which has been proposed in 2014 by Prime Minister Narendra Modi led NDA government, the focus is on two very basic issues of giving increased attention to the CLMV countries which include Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam. Second, the attempt is to expand the horizon of the Look East policy to include countries such as Japan in the East to Australia and New Zealand in the South. The arc of the Act East Policy has expanded and therefore cord between the Indian Ocean and the Pacific looks more concrete and formalised.

The slew of strategic partnerships that India has signed in the last eight years with Australia, Korea, Malaysia, Singapore and Japan (even though Global Security Partnership) encapsulates the larger strategic framework that India has been looking forward to. In the case of Vietnam, increased interactions and better diplomatic manoeuvres were seen when the Communist Party of Vietnam General Secretary went to the US, Japan

and India within a year showcasing the strategic priorities for Vietnam with regard to these nations and how Vietnam positions itself as the epicentre of the strategic discourse related to the Indo-Pacific. When one looks into the geographical expanse of the East Asia Summit it expands from the Eurasian region to the west coast of the US, clearly signifying the larger geopolitical expanse of the informal forum. However, given the fact that the larger geopolitics has become more maritime in orientation, therefore the Oceans depict the larger canvas of geostrategic priorities. The fusion of Indian and Pacific Ocean signify this tectonic movement from the integration envisaged in the early 1990s when Asian and Pacific regions were fused as the Asia-Pacific construct. However, in the larger discourse with regard to Asia-Pacific India was missing in the early phases. The exclusion of India forms the Asia-Pacific cooperation and subsequent attempts were also made to exclude India from the East Asia Summit but the inclusion of India in the informal summit expanded the horizon and helped in bringing important stakeholders to the Asia-Pacific region. The increased attention that was given to India and also subsequently to Vietnam resulted from three major factors; firstly, a rather impressive economic growth ranging between 6-8 per cent and secondly having a large youth working force. And lastly, the attempt made by both countries to modernise its defence and military weapons as well as equipment led to a belief that these two countries can play a viable role in the larger strategic discourse.

Foreign Minister Pham Binh Minh during his speech at ICWA, New Delhi said, “I think we should have an ever-broader view that Asia-Pacific and South Asia are interlinked into what is called Indo-Pacific. There are today many proposals, ideas, concepts and initiatives that promote linkage between South Asia with East Asia and the Pacific. This reflects a reality that we all share common prosperity; our destinies are intertwined. And ASEAN plays the crucial role as the bridge linking our regions, as the threshold for India to enter Asia-Pacific”.⁴

Tran Dai Quang, President of Vietnam while outlining Vietnam's priorities said and outlined the different formulations which exist at the regional and transregional levels. He said, "the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement between ASEAN and its six partners; India's "Act East" Policy; China's "Belt and Road Initiative"; Japan's "Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy"; the United States' "Free and Open Indo-Pacific Vision"; and, most recently, the establishment of the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership, joined by eleven economies on both sides of the Pacific".⁵ He outlined priorities for his nation when he said, "this aspiration will only come true when all countries share a common vision for an open and rules-based region, and a common interest in the maintenance of peace, stability, and inclusive prosperity, wherein no country, no nation, and no group shall be left behind".⁶

There is an inherent need to protect the freedom of navigation and unhindered trade, and not let the Indo-Asia-Pacific be Balkanised into spheres of influence manipulated by power politics, hindered by protectionism, or divided by narrow nationalism.⁷ He said, "We should promote maritime connectivity as a key area, not just in bilateral relations but also in the context of peace, stability and development in the Indo-Asia-Pacific region".⁸ The speech clearly outlined what is the future of this bilateral relationship and contextualized it keeping Indo-pacific as centre of vision. President Quang said during a media interaction, "We will work together for an independent, open and prosperous Indo-Pacific region where sovereignty and international laws are respected and disputes are resolved through dialogue".⁹ Prime Minister Modi also reiterated the same views. He said, "We have decided that we will enhance cooperation in defence production and explore opportunities in transfer of technology. We will jointly work for an open, independent and prosperous Indo-Pacific area where sovereignty and dialogue mechanism to resolve disputes is respected".¹⁰

Even in the Delhi Dialogue 2018 edition, the theme line was “Strengthening India-ASEAN Maritime Cooperation” primarily outlining the maritime dimension of India-ASEAN cooperation and cooperating connectivity. Further during the India-ASEAN Blue Economy workshop, Ms Preeti Saran said, “It is this reality that led our prime minister to highlight the importance that we attach to the subject of ASEAN-India Cooperation in the Maritime Domain since we believe that it will be a key facilitator for growth and development of the Indo-Pacific region”.¹¹ In his speech at Shangri-La Dialogue, Prime Minister Modi said, “India’s global strategic partnership with the United States has overcome the hesitations of history and continues to deepen across the extraordinary breadth of our relationship. It has assumed new significance in the changing world. And, an important pillar of this partnership is our shared vision of an open, stable, secure and prosperous Indo-Pacific Region”.¹² He further added, “India Armed Forces, especially our Navy, are building partnerships in the Indo-Pacific region for peace and security, as well as humanitarian assistance and disaster relief. They train, exercise and conduct goodwill missions across the region. For example, with Singapore, we have the longest uninterrupted naval exercise, which is in its twenty-fifth year now.... We work with partners like Vietnam to build mutual capabilities. The Indo-Pacific is a natural region. It is also home to a vast array of global opportunities and challenges.... I am increasingly convinced with each passing day that the destinies of those of us who live in the region are linked. Today, we are being called to rise above divisions and competition to work together”.¹³

In fact, ASEAN also took note of the concept of Indo-Pacific and it was reflected in one of the Joint Communiques released in 2013. It said, “We took note of the idea for an Indo-Pacific framework envisaged based on the principles contained in the TAC and in line with the 2011 Declaration of the East Asia Summit on the Principles for Mutually Beneficial Relations (Bali Principles)”.¹⁴ ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-

Pacific also highlights that maritime security is one of the areas where ASEAN can seek support and assistance from the dialogue partners and might become the converging point between ASEAN priorities and the Indo-Pacific construct. There have been areas which can work for both countries in developing and outlining the concept of Indo-Pacific. These include trade and commerce, investment, energy and cooperation in science and technology. However, the bigger question is whether outline of this vision is there or is it just a geopolitical imagination, still in nascent stages.

Indo-Pacific: Vision or a Dream?

Looking at the Indo-Pacific there are different versions which have been proposed by different countries. Japan has been credited with initiating the first discourse with regard to the Indo-Pacific when the reference was made with regard to the ‘Confluence of the Seas’.¹⁵ Prime Minister Shinzo Abe said, “The Pacific and the Indian Oceans are now bringing about a dynamic coupling as seas of freedom and of prosperity. A “broader Asia” that broke away geographical boundaries is now beginning to take on a distinct form. Our two countries have the ability—and the responsibility—to ensure that it broadens yet further and to nurture and enrich these seas to become seas of clearest transparency”.¹⁶

Michael Auslin in his work on Indo-Pacific stated, “the Indo-Pacific’s unique geography makes the balance of regional security most vulnerable in its “commons”: the open seas, air lanes, and cyber networks that link the region together and to the world. The interests of the United States and its allies and partners lie in protecting the Indo-Pacific commons from any disruption that would cause political tension or conflict, adversely affect global economic activity, or hinder the access of any nation to the rest of the region and globe for political or military reasons. However, as a result of China’s military buildup, in particular, the United States and its allies can no longer be assured

of maintaining regional superiority of forces either numerically or, eventually, qualitatively”.¹⁷

Given this predicament and a looming challenge to US superiority, it has become imperative to address this challenge through diplomatic, military and political means. As a result of which apart from the strategic allies, the US has been looking at partners such as India and Vietnam. For countries such as Australia, Indo-Pacific is a compulsion to build up its security and keep the US engaged in this region. James Ferguson writes “Indo-Pacific’ includes the wider South Asia as well as the Indian Ocean and fused with the Pacific Ocean.” He had argued that after Asia-Pacific, Australia’s foreign policy is directed at sustaining and nurturing this concept. It has been felt that Asia and Australia’s inclusion into Asian organizations would not serve its foreign policy objectives as much as the Indo-Pacific concept would. Australian Defence White paper of 2013 acknowledged and strongly advocated for the ‘Indo-Pacific’. Further, its official documents be it the foreign policy white paper and even the DFAT website acknowledges the importance of the Indo-Pacific. ‘The term ‘Indo-Pacific’ refers to more narrowly (and meaningfully?) consisting of the East Indian Ocean and Western Pacific Ocean as interlinked waters with the South China Sea as a middle intervening stretch. In terms of regions, we can note the argument that ‘regions are, among other things, social constructions created through politics ... cognitive constructs that are rooted in political practice’.¹⁸ Even Indonesia has also subscribed to the concept but has been wary of the responsibilities as well as the new balance which will emerge when China becomes an accepted superpower.

The then Foreign Minister of Indonesia Marty M Natalegawa in his speech at the Conference on Indonesia in Washington said, “In terms of geography it refers to an important triangular spanning two oceans ..., notably with Indonesia at its center”.¹⁹ He further added, “Not least, the term Indo-Pacific brings into focus the reality of the interconnection

between the futures of the Indian and the Pacific Oceans”.²⁰ Given the fact that most of the regional and global powers have subscribed to the concept, there is a future for the concept but like all geopolitical imaginations, this concept also is facing teething problems and this needs to be addressed so that commitment and future possibilities can be explored. Indo-Pacific is seen largely as a security construct and in this context, the defence and strategic ties between India and Vietnam would be a platform for convergence of interest both from a strategic viewpoint and larger defence ties.

Developing Defence Ties and Strategic Understanding

One of the important aspects related to India Vietnam cooperation has been in the field of defence, technology and science. While defence in strategic cooperation has improved over a period of time given the fact that two countries have been utilising Russian systems and many of the officers were trained on erstwhile Soviet Union weapons and platforms. The friendly prices offered by the USSR at one point of time and the increased political understanding with erstwhile Soviet Union made India and Vietnam rely much more on their weapons and platforms. The successor to Soviet Union, Russia enhanced its relationship with the two countries because of the common Soviet/Russian systems and it subsequently grew over a period of time. Vietnam has been resistant to purchase of US weapons systems because of constitutional obligations and the differences with the US.

India has signed one of the earliest MoU on defence cooperation with Vietnam and under its defence diplomacy, India has engaged Vietnam through official high-level military interactions, liaison visits of naval ships, exchange of defence personnel and limited non-lethal weapon exports to Vietnam. With the sale of Brahmos to the Philippines it has been expected that Vietnam would also be able to afford this supersonic missile to strengthen its defences against adversaries which have threatened

Vietnam's maritime security and also challenged its sovereignty on South China Sea islands.

India has been looking for indigenisation in defence and has been looking for alternate means so as to offset the huge defence expenditure that it incurs because of importing various weapon systems and platforms. Defence relations between India and Vietnam have grown with the sanctioning of lines of credit (500 million) for Vietnam to purchase weapon systems and also engage Indian defence manufacturers in providing military platforms and equipment to Vietnamese defence forces. If one looks into the defence cooperation between the two sides it started with India's engagement with many Southeast Asian countries during its liberalisation process in 1991. The wars which the two countries have fought with China respectively in 1962 and 1979 brought forth the concerns, that a powerful neighbour remains a security concern for times to come. However, neither India nor Vietnam, has openly criticised China for its aggressive moves, albeit everyone is concerned with regard to increased Chinese military modernisation across the border as well as in maritime zones.

The differences in relationship with China grew since 1980 when India opened its defence attaché office in Vietnam in 1980 while Vietnam reciprocated by opening its military attaches office in 1985. It has been stated that in 1994 during the visit of the Indian minister defence technology was offered to Vietnam. Vietnam has accepted the offer and during the course of Prime Minister Narasimha Rao's visit to Hanoi in 1994 a protocol on defence cooperation was signed. Further, Vietnam has also entered into an agreement with Hindustan Aeronautics Limited for the overhaul of MIG 21 engines which have been the mainstay of Vietnamese Air Force. In May 1995 Vietnamese military delegation along with its deputy defence minister visited India and toured military installations at Chennai, Hyderabad, Bangalore, Goa, and Pune.²¹

India signed the defence cooperation protocol in the year 2000 which formulated the dialogue between the two defence ministers in terms of exchange of strategic perceptions, intelligence sharing and conduct of naval exercises between the two countries. This protocol and defence cooperation will pave the way for training and repair programs for Vietnamese Air Force aircraft by the Indian Air Force. India also agreed to upgrade the new avionics and radar systems of MIG 21 so that it can be integrated with Russian missile systems including R-77 and R-27 missiles.²²

During the visit of the then defence minister AK Antony to Vietnam, a memorandum of understanding was signed between the two sides in which it was outlined that bilateral cooperation in areas such as National Defense, Army, Navy and Air Force along with training modules was also provisioned. During that time only, security dialogue was instituted which was at the deputy ministerial level.

Since 2000 the interaction between the two defence forces has increased multi-fold under which India had agreed to transfer 5000 naval parts of Petya class ships to Vietnam's navy for functional and operational reasons. The Indian defence delegation had also visited defence industries in Ho Chi Minh city and a Joint Working Group was instituted for looking into the deliverables under the MoU. In the year 2005 Indian Navy gave 150 tonnes of machines related to warships and other accessories to the Vietnamese Peoples Liberation Navy. The government enterprise ordnance factory board also offered materials for turrets, and negotiations related to TNT explosives were also explored. Vietnam has also been scouting for small arms and at one point of time had even purchased carbines from Pakistan which was disliked by the Indian establishment and it was conveyed to the Vietnamese defence ministry. Subsequently, Vietnam had entered into supply agreement with India with regard to aerial photographic films, aircraft tires, short-range missiles up to the range of 5 km, and a large number of submarine batteries.²³ Even though

there has been a lot which has been provisioned under the MoU and defence cooperation the defence trade between the two sides has been very limited.

One of the important areas of cooperation which have been left and explored is related to science and technology. Vietnamese National Defence forces have been working on upgrading their capabilities in Hi-tech defence warfare and therefore they have been looking for possibilities related to setting up an institute of military strategy, military science and technology, and military history.

India's entry into the elite missile technology control regime MTCR club had facilitated India's export of Brahmos missiles to third rd world countries and Vietnam has been keen to purchase the equipment. Following the export of Brahmos missiles to the Philippines there is a high probability of Vietnam also purchasing it in due course of time. Vietnam has also embarked on military modernisation programme where it has inducted Russian made frigates, 6-kilo class submarines and purchased one full squadron of Sukhoi-30 MKV aircrafts. Vietnam has reciprocated India's approach of providing the docking facilities in Nha Trang and Cam Ranh Bay. Since 2015 there has been wide-ranging discussions between the two sides on a number of issues which include training of technicians and maintenance staff for Sukhoi-30 MKV fighter planes, cooperation in aerospace, live firing exercises for the Sukhoi pilots in Indian firing ranges, and long term training modules for Vietnamese Sukhoi-30 pilots.

Possibilities and Challenges

Taking into cognizance the trajectory of evolution of the Indo-pacific, there are five discernible arguments which have been made from different countries and groups of strategic thinkers. The first group which comprises of the Australian experts have stated that Indo-Pacific should be the fulcrum of global politics and in fact, Australian governments in its

document have tried to fulfil this objective of placing Indo-Pacific as the centre of their policy articulations. This has been seen in the case of the Defence White Papers since 2009 and also very late in the Foreign Policy White paper released in 2018. The objective was that Australia should act as the vantage point as well as the strategic tower of the Indo-Pacific discourse.

The second group of scholars hailing primarily from China and its friendly countries have called this either a myth or an anti-China formulation which cannot sustain itself. In order to counter this, with the economic might of China, the one belt one Road was heavily sponsored and promoted by the Chinese government as well as by almost all Chinese think tanks. The third group of strategic thinkers primarily from India call Indo-Pacific as a necessary and evolutionary articulation of India's foreign policy priorities, given the fact that Act East Policy effectively overlaps the larger Indo-Pacific region. However, few scholars and even diplomats have called for an East Asian Region much akin to the Hatoyama prognosis of East Asian Community. Ken Rudd has also promulgated the Asia-Pacific Community in 2009. In both these conceptions, Vietnam and India were included in the discourse.

The fourth group of scholars hailing from countries such as Vietnam and Indonesia called for a larger Indo-Pacific region so as to build peace and stability. In fact, Indonesia the then foreign minister Marty Natalegawa had urged for the countries to come together for 'Indo-Pacific Treaty'. This concept was proposed and also supported during the Bambang Yudhoyono but lost sheen when Joko Widodo came into power. However, once again reflections and debates about the viability and acceptance of the Indo-Pacific have started with a few US-supported think tanks urging the Indonesian government to take it forward. Indonesia given that fact is strategically located and has been building a national economy through Global Maritime Fulcrum (GMF) and also working for sustained economic growth has now supported the idea. The

biggest challenge however lies in finding utility and the large objectives for future for this strategic concept.

The last group of scholars hailing from Japan have called for this anti-China alliance and has supported the use of this concept for military, maritime and strategic objectives. Japan has also been credited with working on the draft concept when Prime Minister Abe talked about confluence of two seas. On the contrary, there are countries like Singapore which have a deficit of strategic depth, have denounced Indo-Pacific and have not subscribed to this concept despite being the alliance and strategic partner to almost all countries on the Indo-Pacific horizon including India, the US, Japan and Australia.

There are different strands of thought, however there is a need for a structured approach and this includes the Quad and the regional partners acting as the foundation of this concept as well as working for maintaining peace and stability. The concept needs a suitable economic platform such as Indo-Pacific Economic Corridor to sustain the interest and momentum. In both cases, India and Vietnam would be the most valuable partners for the cause.

Conclusion

India and Vietnam have weathered the end of the Cold war and the bilateral ties have remained unaffected by the change in the geopolitical order. At one point of time, the disintegration of Soviet Union meant that the US would dominate the global strategic scenario but the two countries have created a place for themselves. Both the US and China are engaging the two countries. However, China while challenging the US-led international order has posed serious concerns. It is again argued that whether bringing China onboard the Indo-Pacific concept would bring peace to the larger geostrategic region or not. There are concerns that the uncertain US leadership might lead to serious thinking in the policy establishments of the two countries. However, the fragile situation

and the instability and tensions in the Pacific and the Indian Ocean pose a serious question that what can the two countries do under the ambit of Indo-Pacific to work for a lasting and peaceful solution. Is Beijing's consensus on Asia and particularly Indo-Pacific an impending thing? or there is a better way for the trade, investment and strategic cooperation to foster in Indo-Pacific.

India and Vietnam can act as the responsible stakeholders and should make things clear in various forums that peace cannot be comprised in the power balance between the US and China. However, the two countries need to strengthen the dynamic relationship with the two powers—US and China so as to bring peace and harmony to the region. Indo-Pacific like all other formations needs an economic foundation to work and engage the willing partners because, given the lacklustre US performance and an increasingly assertive China, the choices are limited. While ASEAN centrality is required by ASEAN, it should keep contentious issues as the focus of its discussion otherwise it would not augur well for its future. Undermining the concerns of the new ASEAN members on territorial and related issues is important so that the inherent fissures in ASEAN should not get apparent and visible. India and Vietnam must work out their bilateral strategy while taking into consideration the multilateral dynamics. ASEAN would serve them but the need is to address security and economics in a balanced way. However, the time has come to address security in maritime and related spheres in a more concerted way.

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