

India-Vietnam Relations: RSTV – The Big Picture

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Larger Background:

- As Vice President of India M. Venkaiah Naidu begins his four-day official visit to Vietnam, we look at India's comprehensive strategic partnership with the Southeast Asian nation.
- In his packed tour, the Vice President will hold one-on-one talks with the leaders of Vietnam, participate in the 16th United Nations Day of Vesak and deliver a keynote address at the inaugural session of the event themed as "Buddhist Approach to Global Leadership and Shared Responsibilities for Sustainable Societies."
- During the high level talks, the two sides are expected to discuss a wide range of issues including trade & investment relations, giving better market access to India's exports, exploring opportunities in oil and gas sectors, seeking support for Indian pharmaceutical facilities in Vietnam, cooperation in defence and space technologies, training and capacity building of Vietnamese defence forces and strengthening of cultural bonds between the two nations are expected to figure during the talks

Historical Background:

- India-Vietnam relations have been exceptionally friendly and cordial since their foundations were laid by the founding fathers of the two countries - President Ho Chi Minh and President Rajendra Prasad and Prime Minister Nehru.
- The traditionally close and cordial relations have their historical roots in the common struggle for liberation from foreign rule and the national struggle for independence. Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru was one of the first visitors to Vietnam after its victory against the French at Dien Bien Phu in 1954.
- President Ho Chi Minh went to India in February 1958. President Rajendra Prasad visited Vietnam in 1959.
- In recent times, political contacts have strengthened as reflected in several high-level visits by leaders from both sides.
- Trade and economic linkages continue to grow. India's thrust under the 'Look East' policy combined with Vietnam's growing engagement within the region and with India has paid rich dividends.
- Vietnam is an important regional partner in South East Asia. India and Vietnam closely cooperate in various regional forums such as ASEAN, East Asia Summit, Mekong Ganga Cooperation, Asia Europe Meeting (ASEM) besides UN and WTO.

Analysis by the Experts:

History of India-Vietnam Relations:

- The bilateral relations between India and Vietnam are truly historical, civilizational and cultural in nature.
- The relations are marked by mutual respect, trust and understanding.
- Both the countries cooperate very strongly bilaterally, but also in regional and international fora. In the area of political relations between the two countries, the strategic partnership was established in 2007, and this was upgraded to a comprehensive strategic partnership in 2016. In fact, there are only

two countries in addition to India with whom Vietnam has such a comprehensive strategic partnership- those are China and Russia. This was done during the visit of Prime Minister Modi to Vietnam in September 2016.

- This was a very significant visit. As a matter of fact, it was the first bilateral visit by an Indian Prime Minister to Vietnam after 2001 (after a gap of around 15 years).
- Over the last few years, India's relations with Vietnam have really expanded, grown and strengthened. 2017 was a very significant year because it marked the 10th anniversary of the establishment of the strategic partnership, and the 45th anniversary of the establishment of bilateral relations in 1972. A large number of visits took place in the year 2017.
- 2018 was also a landmark year in terms of bringing the two countries together.
- In March 2018, the Vietnamese President had visited India and towards the end of that year, Prime Minister Modi as well had visited Vietnam. Thus, politically, there has been a rapid interaction.

Areas where the countries are cooperating:

- The two countries are cooperating in the areas of defence and security. These two areas have emerged as important areas.
- Whether it is the issue of the South China Sea, or Vietnam's Exclusive Economic Zone, there are quite a few issues that bring both the countries together.
- When President Pranab Mukherjee had visited Vietnam in September 2014, there was a line of credit of 100 million dollars, which was given to Vietnam to purchase 4 patrol vessels.
- When Prime Minister Modi visited Vietnam, a line of credit of 500 million dollars was given.
- Thus, defense and security has emerged as an important area of cooperation.
- However, in addition to this, there is also trade and commerce. Currently, the bilateral trade exchanges between India and Vietnam are to the tune of about 13 billion dollars, and we expect it to increase to 15 Billion dollars by about 2020.

Possible Takeaways from the visit of the Vice President:

One of the aspects that makes the Indo-Vietnam relationship very important at this juncture is the prism through which both of them look at regional security. This prism is quite similar and promotes for a certain amount of strategic congruence between the two very palpable and apparent.

This is the reason as to why we have seen such a great degree of political back-and forth between the two countries. There is a great political convergence that has emerged. This is largely reflective of some of the ground realities which we see in the region.

There are certain question areas which would be the focus of the visit:

1. What is happening in the region?
2. What is happening in the maritime space?
3. Bilaterally what the two countries can do in terms of enhancing India's market access in certain critical areas which India has been trying to push for.

Thus, Vietnam has emerged as a very important point of advocacy for Indian interests in the larger ASEAN construct and in the larger South-East Asian region. This perhaps makes Vietnam also very important for India. Hence, one sees a sustained level of bilateral cooperation between the two countries and this visit will also ensure some of those regional issues where perhaps India can further push the agenda.

The Core Strategic Point of View:

- In 2015, a joint vision was agreed to in which the most important areas that was agreed to was the capacity building of the Vietnamese forces- including the Army, Navy and the Air Force.

- Vietnam also takes part in the maritime naval exercises which India initiates, such as the MILAN exercises. The aim of the exercise was to enhance interoperability between the navies of the region and to exchange best practices.

A Reason to Explore Vietnam:

- There is a lot of potential that can be reached in the bilateral relationship between India and Vietnam. The Vietnamese economy, as well as the Indian economy is growing very rapidly. Thus, there is a great possibility of the two countries working together; identifying new areas; identifying new fields, sectors of cooperation. Oil and gas exploration is also a key area.
- Relations between India and Vietnam really reflect a very balanced mix. This is because both India and Vietnam have the same position as far as the issues in the maritime area of the South China Sea. Both India and Vietnam regard the area of the South China Sea as the Indo-Pacific. This is not something that China would particularly be happy with.
- When President Kovind visited Vietnam in late 2018, the joint agreement that came up, focused on maintaining peace, and tranquility, and security in the Indo-Pacific.
- Even in the area of people-to-people contacts: The Indian cultural centre has been established in Vietnam.
- Similarly, a centre for Vietnamese relations has been established here in India. A Centre for Indian studies has been established in the universities there.
- Thus, across the board there are great possibilities and huge potential which the visit of the Vice President would give a significant impetus to.
- Not only at the level of the leadership, but even at the ministerial level, we have had engagements. There have been visits from Vietnam also to India.
- Both the countries are looking very seriously at each other to enhance and broaden the partnership in a multifaceted manner.

Has India been able to explore the Vietnamese weapon market?

- We are trying to get there, but there is still much more that can be done. Especially, if you look at the source from where Vietnam has historically got much of their weapon systems from- much of it has been Russian vintage. Thus, there is a great potential there because much of India's weapon systems are also Russian vintage.
- There have been discussions around BRAHMOS between the two countries- this has not yet been finalized. There have been a range of issues over which discussions have moved forward.

There are certain common issues which both the countries are facing such as:

1. The rise of China
 2. A lack of support from the Americans to the regional security architecture
 3. The flux within the ASEAN and the desire within the ASEAN member states to see India emerge as a security provider in some senses (Vietnam becomes a very important nation in this regard which would allow India a leverage into the larger south-east Asian architecture).
- However, while the convergence has been amplified to a large extent, the defense relationship has not yet moved with the speed at which some would have expected.
 - Defense engagements have lagged behind apart from the engagements we have had with naval exercises, and our bilateral and multilateral relationships with Vietnam.
 - Bilateral defense cooperation has been somewhat lagging.
 - While India and Vietnam do share common security perceptions, yet both India and Vietnam are hesitant to go beyond a point. There is a degree of hesitation which perhaps India as a larger country should be able to overcome. India has been exploring possibilities of co-production with Vietnam. India and Vietnam can also move ahead in terms of sharing intelligence, surveillance and

reconnaissance capabilities.

Concluding Remarks:

- In terms of cultural proximity, India is much closer to Thailand and Cambodia.
- With respect to other countries in South-East Asia, the Srivijaya Empire controlled modern-day Indonesia and much of the Malay Archipelago from the seventh to twelfth centuries. However, it was the Chola navies that invaded and conquered Srivijaya in the Malayan archipelago. Thus, there are historical links that India share with them as well.
- Thus, there is an impact of Indian culture and civilization in these areas that finds manifestations even in the form of architecture and sculptures as well. The Indian diaspora in Vietnam is not large when compared to other countries in South and South-East Asia. However, Buddhism binds India and Vietnam together.
- The visit of the Honourable Vice President of India would give impetus to Indo-Vietnamese ties.