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INDIA–VIETNAM: FIFTY YEARS ON THE PATH OF INTERACTION

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Abstract. 2022 is the fiftieth year of diplomatic relations between India and Vietnam. The article is an attempt to follow the history and stages of the bilateral relations, mutual interests and their limiters. The author discusses the main trends of the current interaction in the scope of comprehensive strategic partnership. The conclusion is made of a favorable prospect of the two countries' relations, which meets the interests of Russia.

Keywords: Vietnam, India, partnership, interests, Chinese factor, security, economy.

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Introduction

The past fifty years were the time of steady advancing development of Vietnam – India relations. Their importance often went beyond the bilateral format and so today they are relevant not only as a crucial factor, but also pressing in a broader regional context, also, considering the situation in the virtual triangle of “Vietnam–India–China”. Also, the relations between Hanoi and New Delhi are of importance for Moscow, as India and Vietnam are among the priority foreign policy partners of Russia.

The theme of the two countries' relations attracts researchers' intent attention. There are mostly works by Indian experts such as A. Malhotra [Malhotra 2012], H.V. Pant [Pant 2018], A. Godbole [Godbole 2017]. In their comprehensive research of history, mutual interests and current agenda of the bilateral relations they almost unanimously conclude on “the top priority” of India-Vietnam relations. New Delhi calls them “the pillar” of the Indian East Asian Policy (Look East Policy and Act East Policy). Also, there is an apparent consensus in the estimation of India's main incentives for interaction. Usually, the chief ones are “the Chinese factor”, as well as the geographical location of Vietnam near maritime communications crucial for India, the South China Sea among them. Among the mutual strategic interests there is also “ensuring energy security” [Chaturvedy: 21.07.2022]. Nevertheless, a number of

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analysts, for example, from Drishti IAS expert center, speak of the cooperation's "challenges and limiters", but do not attach any dramatism to them [To the Point: 20.05.2019]

Also, the Indian aspect of the SRV policy attracts attention of Vietnamese specialists, such as Vo Xuan Vinh [Vo Xuan Vinh 2013], Linh Pham [Linh Pham 2020] and others. The mainstream of these publications is also the positive estimation of the nature and prospect of Vietnam-India relations, awareness of mutual goals and driving forces of "Act East Policy" and policy of Vietnam. It is observed that on the ground of such common imperatives like strengthening relations with traditional friends, multilateralism, desire of broad diversification of relations with partners, India and Vietnam can build close and strong strategic relations [Vo Xuan Vinh 2013: 48].

Also, Vietnam-India relations are investigated in the works by experts of third countries. Thus, a researcher of the Stanton University A. Panda [Panda: 05.03.2018] and a researcher of the Institute of South Asian Studies of the National University of Singapore R. Borah [Borah: 01.03.2018] also pay attention to serious strategic motivations for India-Vietnam rapprochement closely connected at the same time with their concerns facing China. At the same time the Singapore specialist mentions that "not everything is rosy in this burgeoning relationship", for example, in the "modest" trade and economic sphere.

The two countries' relations are also the subject of Russian research-works. However, they discuss but separate aspects. Thus, E.V. Bragina in her research-work on trade and economic relations of the two countries, "the Chinese factor" among them, concludes that despite modest (so far) volumes of the bilateral trade recently it "has gained momentum" [Bragina 2019: 40].

Different stages, unchanged tendency

Historical versions of the earliest economic and cultural exchange between the peoples who lived on the territories of today's India and Vietnam go back to the 2nd century A.D. These versions evidence that in the 7th – 17th centuries Champa, the state on the territory of current Vietnam, bore a clear imprint of Indian tradition and culture introduced by Buddhist monks and other emigrants from Hindustan [Cultures: 01.04. 2014]. In 1972 the establishment of official relations between the Democratic Republic of Vietnam and the Republic of India was, on the one hand, the tribute to historical logic and, on the other, it was an impulse to the gradual development of mutually beneficial relations.

But prior to this, in 1954, J. Nehru was one of the first world leaders, who visited Vietnam soon after the victory over the French in the Battle of Dien Bien Phu. Four years later Ho Chi Minh, President of the DRV, visited India and said that India-Vietnam relations "flourished under the serene sky" [Dipanjan: 11.06.2021]. That start set the tone to the current relations of the two states, which later had to go through several major stages, being invariably friendly ones.

Already in the early years after the establishment of diplomatic relations, India opposed the US actions during the Vietnam War and spoke out in favor of the democratic reunion of the country. Later India became one of a few countries of the non-Socialist world which took the side of Vietnam during the Third Indochina War. Those steps found Vietnam's positive response.

In 1975 India gave Vietnam preferential treatment for trade. In 1978 the two countries signed a trade agreement. In 1982 regular sessions of the Joint Commission for Economic and Scientific-Technical Cooperation were initiated; it is functioning to this day with two Foreign Affairs Ministers at the head.

In the late 1970s the defense and security cooperation began gain momentum. In spring of 1979 Indian military delegation visited northern regions of Vietnam affected with a border war.

In 1984 and 1989, the CPV Secretaries General's visits to India were the impulses to new exchanges of high-level visits. Also, there developed contacts in other spheres, the cultural and humanitarian ones among them. The vector of bilateral relations acquired the sense of close partnership.

In the 1990s the disappearance of the world bipolar system predestined also inevitable transformations in domestic and foreign policies of many states, India and Vietnam among them. However, with all those changes at the background it is noteworthy that they have not weakened the positive trend of the Vietnam-India dialogue.

The important Indian novation, Look East Policy proclaimed by Narasimha Rao government, objectively assisted to this. The new course, providing mostly for foreign orientation of economic policy, meant enhancing relations with the states of East Asia, but first and foremost with those of Southeast Asia. From the very beginning, New Delhi gave priority to Vietnam, India's constant partner [Malhotra 2012: 76]. It is obvious that Hanoi, who also needed "post-bipolar" diversification, was ready to please his traditionally friendly partner [Vietnam among pillars...: 18.11.2013]

In any event, enhancing relations were typical of the early 1990s, particularly in the economic sphere. Also, some progress was notable in the defense sphere (new agreements) [Malhotra 2012: 81].

But it is highly important that in the early 21st century the mechanism of bilateral interaction have been significantly strengthened through maintaining dialogue at the highest level. In 2001 Prime-Minister of India made an official visit to the SRV; in 2005 and 2007 the CPV Secretary-General and Prime Minister of Vietnam visited India. During fifteen years of the 21st century there were made fifteen mutual visits at the high and highest levels (the visits of the CPV Secretaries-General, as well as Presidents and Vice-Presidents, Prime Ministers and parliamentary Heads of the two countries). A close dialogue was maintained between the heads and high representatives of Foreign Affairs Ministries.

Negotiations at the high and highest levels ended with a number of fundamental agreements, among them there was the Joint Framework Declaration on Comprehensive Cooperation, the first complex document since the beginning of official relations signed by Foreign Affairs Ministers on May 1, 2003. The Declaration paved the way to another significant event, that is, the bilateral relations reached the level of "strategic partnership". This was proclaimed in July 2007 in the course of negotiations of the two countries' Prime Ministers. The document on strategic partnership contained also the agreement to launch since 2009 "Strategic dialogue at the level of Foreign Affairs Deputy-Ministers [Pant 2018: 4].

"Strategic and comprehensive" interaction

There are reasons to count out a new stage of the bilateral relations from the second half of the 2010s. At the least, there are two reasons.

First, given the positive dynamics of the dialogue, India and Vietnam decided to give the highest status to it, the status of "comprehensive strategic partnership". This was declared in the Joint statement from September 3, 2016, during the visit of Narendra Modi, Prime Minister of India, to Vietnam.

Second, there appeared a new, so to say, catalyst, i.e., a new version of "East Policy", – the "Look East Policy" was renamed the "Act East Policy" in 2014 [The Big Picture: 22.08.2022]. Indian experts state that it meant not a mere correction of the form, but also an important specification of its content,

while the former “economic, cultural and humanitarian tasks” were added now with the target of “the security cooperation and defense partnerships as well”, as well as the desire “to build ties with countries in the wider Asia-Pacific region, including Australia, New Zealand, Japan, and South Korea” [Mazumdar: 15.03.2021]. At the same time, such targets were mentioned as responses to the growth of territorial influence and “China’s assertiveness in the South China Sea” [The Big Picture : 22.08.2022].

However, from the standpoint of India-SRV relations, it was crucial to India to increase their importance. Prime Minister N. Modi spoke plainly about it [Godbole 2017: 2]. Experts spoke more expressively, emphasizing that “Vietnam has been emerging as a pivotal state in India’s Act East policy” [To the Point: 20.05.2019].

It is significant that such an approach is but supported in Vietnam. Time and again Vietnamese experts wrote about this welcoming the role of Vietnam in India’s regional policy [Linh Pham: 27.08.2020].

Exchange of visits at the high and highest levels continued. In 2018 Prime Minister of Vietnam visited India; Presidents of the two countries made cross-visits. In May 2019 Vice-President of India arrived in Vietnam, and in February 2020 his Vietnamese colleague visited India.

During Covid-19 pandemics the contacts did not weaken, but went into the virtual mode. The virtual summit on December 21, 2020 was a landmark event; then Prime Ministers of the two countries made comprehensive statement “The Joint Vision of the World, Prosperity and Peoples”. Having summarized the development of relations the document outlined the broad prospects for interaction in the period ahead [Ministry of External Affairs: 21.12.2020]. Later (in July 2021 and April 2022) there were telephone negotiations between Head of India’s Government and Prime Minister and President of the SRV.

As far as the practical cooperation is concerned, in August 2020 the 17th session (online) of the Joint Commission for Economic and Scientific-Technical Cooperation was held, which was an important event.

However, in 2021 some in-person contacts were renewed: in September the speakers of the Indian and Vietnamese parliaments met in Vienna. The Foreign Affairs Ministers of the two countries conducted talks in the lobbies of the regular General Assembly of the UN in New York. Their next meeting took place in June 2022 in New Delhi; also, Head of the Vietnam’s diplomacy was received by Prime Minister of India [Vietnamese FM: 17.06.2022].

Imperatives and interests

The above-exposed picture of history, stages and general nature of the relations contributes to a clearer understanding of their driving forces and mutual interests. Clearly, the main motive is the mutual desire to use “strategic and comprehensive” interaction with the purpose to fortify own foreign policy stances (first and foremost regional ones), contribute to the interests of their security and economic development. At the same time, it is obvious that both India and China consider the PRC policy to be one of the main challenges to these interests. Both countries have territorial disputes with China; both Hanoi and New Delhi express their hidden (sometimes explicit) concerns with “the PRC’s desire for regional dominance”.

This mutual imperative is especially frankly formulated in the Indian expert community: “Having faced Chinese aggression in 1972 and 1979, India and Vietnam have shared a degree of antagonism

towards China. Vietnam's streak for independence and its strong defence against hegemonic powers in the region was seen by India as a potential force to counter Chinese ambitions." [Malhotra 2012: 80].

India expresses the most serious interests in the field of "maritime cooperation" with the SRV. On the one hand, India means the needs of the country as "the maritime nation", with 90% maritime trade volume, on the other, the geostrategic location of Vietnam "being the direct player in the South China Sea is especially important from the point of view of commercial shipping, the way for a large share of Indian commercial cargos" [Chaturvedy: 21.07.2022]. This is why India highly appreciates the interaction with Vietnam in the disputes for "freedom of navigation" and "the open sea space". At the end of the 2010s India began to discuss the conception of "the united Indo-Pacific", which, in specialists' opinion, reflects India's goals "to establish in the region a flexible system of geopolitical balancers in the conditions of the growing China's influence and the consequent US interest in the region" [Gulevich: 23.01.2019]. In this balance system New Delhi offers a significant place to Hanoi expecting the counter movement, also, due to its dispute with Beijing in the South China Sea.

One should keep in mind that despite the complexity of the "Chinese factor" perception both India and Vietnam show the mood towards the constructive dialogue with the PRC in the spheres of mutual interests (the PRC is the chief foreign economic partner for Vietnam and definitely the main import market for India) [Department of Commerce: 23.08.2022]. Both Hanoi and New Delhi desire to avoid crossing anti-China "red lines", first and foremost in what the both capitals' sufficiently close dialogue with Washington is concerned.

Generally speaking, the factors contributing to the rapprochement is historical absence of any notable bilateral political concerns, disputes, commonalties in international priorities, including the desire for "the strategic autonomy" and diversified policy combining a broad international interaction with independence and the equal distance from different centers of influence and force. India highly appreciates the Vietnamese support in its desire to become a constant member of the UN Security Council and to join APEC.

Security, defense, international agenda

As far as the relations of the two countries are concerned, "comprehensive partnership" is not at all a figure of speech; it reflects their real desire for a dialogue in a broad spectrum of events. An attempt itself to give a short agenda of events necessarily leads at first to the sphere of "strategic stability", security and defense.

Launched in 2009, *the Strategic dialogue* at the level of Foreign Affairs Deputy-Ministers by summer 2022 had already numbered eight rounds. The eighth meeting held in November 2021 focused particularly on the task of fortifying the bilateral cooperation according to India's Initiative on Indo-Pacific Region (IPOI, stipulates for seven items of cooperation on "the maritime topic" beginning with security and transport to ecology and Ocean's resources) [Ministry of External Affairs: 12.11.2021].

The Defense Cooperation of the two countries is based on a number of bilateral documents (including those from March 2000 and November 2009) saying, in particular, of India's obligations to render assistance in creating Vietnam's defense industry and general fortification of Vietnamese Air Force and Navy, as well as in the training of Vietnamese military personnel. Also, they envisaged India's supplies of a number of weapons [Malhotra 2012: 81-84].

Also, Joint Statement on mutual vision of defense relations (May 2015) and the Joint Statement on the results of the above-mentioned visit of India's Prime Minister to Vietnam (September 2016) are of great importance. In the scope of the proclaimed "comprehensive partnership" India announced to grant two credit lines to Vietnam (US\$100 and 500 mln) for purchasing Indian military equipment. The contract to supply twelve Larsen & Toubro maritime high-speed patrol boats to Vietnam was signed [Ministry of External Affairs: 03.09. 2016].

The equipment of the both armies with many types of Russian military technology contributes to their interaction. Therefore, Indian more experienced forces can help Vietnamese submariners and pilots. In summer 2021 joint military exercises have been conducted with the participation of Navies in the South China Sea.

The "Joint Vision Statement on India-Vietnam Defence Partnership towards 2030" and the Memorandum of Understanding on mutual logistics support signed in June 2022 in Hanoi by two Defense Ministers were considered to be a new important step in strengthening the defense cooperation. The agreements will permit Indian and Vietnamese Navy and Air Force to refuel and get technical support in each other's marine and port facilities [Peri: 08.06.2022].

Besides, it is expected that in addition to the mentioned contract of patrol boats Vietnam will receive a "Khukri"-class corvette.

In their *international agenda* Vietnam and India state their intention to interact in multilateral formats, including the UN, mechanisms of ASEAN, in ASEM, as well as in the Mekong – Gang Cooperation Structure (MGCS). Vietnam supports India in its full-format dialogue with ASEAN, the key organization for the entire India's "East Policy".

It is obvious that interacting on regional sites, India and Vietnam desire to promote their security interests, also, in the context of already mentioned complicated relations with the PRC, which desires to establish reliable relationships with ASEAN and other important structures. One of these structures, in the opinion a number of experts, is, for example, the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), represented with six South Asian countries headed by India, and ASEAN member-countries Myanmar and Thailand. BIMSTEC structure, where Pakistan and China are absent (though Beijing showed interest in the organization) [Anand: 11.03.2014], is important for India not only at the background of the contest with the PRC (also, in Myanmar), but also from the point of view of the development of India's north-eastern states and their involvement into the inter-regional economic dialogue [Yahya: 01.09.2005]. However, some regional experts believe that joining BIMSTEC would meet interests of Vietnam, which could enter, at least, new export markets [Hasan: 23.11.2021]. So far, there is no evidence that Hanoi would take visible steps in this direction and the reason may be "difficulties in Bangkok's stance" [Yahya: 01.09.2005]. However, if Vietnam had joined BIMSTEC, the organization could have performed the role of an additional site of Vietnam-India interaction along the broad agenda, namely, from economics to security.

Trade-economic and other spheres

The above-mentioned spheres are important, but it was a simplification to think that India-Vietnam interaction agenda is limited with them. No wonder that analysts emphasize that the two countries relations "should not be looked from only the prism of Vietnam is for India, what Pakistan is for China. There is a huge scope of cooperation in the multidimensional sector" [To the Point:

20.05.2019]. Indeed, New Delhi and Hanoi possess many other cooperation spheres, such as trade and investments, science and technologies, culture, industrial cooperation, extractive industry and so on.

India-Vietnam *trade* has grown from US\$200 mln in 2000 to US\$14,1 billion in 2021-2022 (Indian fiscal year); in 2015 it grew threefold. The establishment of India-ASEAN Free Trade Zone has contributed to its promotion. Indian statistics show that in mid-2022 Vietnam position is not very high; Vietnam is the twenty-third in the rating of twenty-five India's largest trade partners. But in any case, it is higher than Russia which is the last on the list. In the list of India's trade partners among ASEAN countries Vietnam is the fourth after Singapore, Indonesia and Malaysia [Department of Commerce: 12.09.2022]. At the same time, India constantly enters Vietnam's top-10 trade partners.

For the both parties trade seems to be balanced, with a small positive balance in favor of Vietnam. Indian capital invested in Vietnam almost US\$2 billion, having channeled them into more as 200 investment projects in such sectors as energy, mineral exploration, agrochemicals, sugar, tea and coffee production, IT-technologies and auto parts [Bhatla: 01.12.2020]. Vietnam's investments, about USD29 mln, in 2021, were realized in Indian pharmacy, IT-technologies, chemicals and building materials production.

In the sphere of extractive industry India and Vietnam have exploited oil resources in the South China Sea for more than thirty years. According to agreement between the Indian ONG Corporation and PetroVietnam Exploration Production Corp explore (in spite of the PRC's discontent) new marine minerals. Also, Vietnam expects India's assistance in the sphere of peaceful nuclear energy.

Humanitarian cooperation agenda is rich enough. The Indian Swami Vivekananda Cultural Center (SVCC), established in Hanoi functions successfully. There are scientific and youth exchanges. Academic connections are being developed. Launching direct flights between the countries in 2019 and simplified visa regime introduced by the parties contributed to *tourist contacts* development [Embassy of India: 01.05.2022]

Conclusion

Positive trends do not mean that a dialogue is free of challenges and unresolved problems. The both countries consider the volumes and level of their economic cooperation insufficient. Vietnam's attitude to some regional projects with India's participation is cautious. (Quad). "The China's factor", on the one hand, urges Vietnam and India on each other, but on the other, sometimes makes them conduct the bilateral dialogue with special caution "respecting the red-lines".

Nevertheless, the prospects of India-Vietnam partnership seem to be sufficiently reliable. On July 21, 2022, the influential Indian newspaper "Hindu" accentuated in its Editorial Commentary that the road map supported by the leaders of the two countries, contributes to finding answers to common challenges and can give a decisive impetus to India-Vietnam partnership, hereby fortifying the regional stability.

This scenario seems to be hardly hampered with the current international turbulence (around Ukraine, Taiwan). In both cases India and Vietnam hold to like moderate positions (latent distancing from the anti-Russian sanctions and "neutral" voting on Ukraine in the UN; the "one-China" principle in the Taiwan issue). The two capitals give no signs of changes in the former "autonomous" course to strong partnership with all the significant players. Also, it is expected that such a course will hardly undergoes essential correction facing possible new accents in international transformations.

The positive development of Vietnam-India dialogue (being priority Asian partners of Russia, along with China,) meets Russia's foreign policy interests. The situation in Asia and the Asia-Pacific Region, including large marine spaces of the region, will stabilize, if all the major states, the neighbors of India and Vietnam among them, are involved in the constructive dialogue for solving inevitable problems and if the only goal of their relations impulse is that of development and peace.

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