

# A política de olhar para o leste da Índia: o papel fundamental do Vietnã em meio à influência regional crescente da China



*India's look east policy: Vietnam's pivotal role amidst China's rising regional influence*

*Política de mirada al este de la India: el poderoso papel de Vietnam en medio de la creciente influencia regional de China*

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Enviado: Novembro de 2024  
Aceito em: 30 de Abril de 2025

## RESUMO

Índia e Vietnã estabeleceram uma Parceria Estratégica Abrangente em 2016. Ambos os países são pilares importantes nas políticas e estratégias regionais e globais um do outro. Em particular, o Vietnã desempenha um papel muito significativo na Política de Ação para o Leste da Índia desde seu anúncio pelo Primeiro Ministro Narendra Modi em 2014. Este artigo utiliza principalmente métodos de análise qualitativa por meio de fontes de dados secundárias para esclarecer a posição e o papel do Vietnã na Política de Ação para o Leste da Índia diante dos desafios da China. Os resultados mostram que a Índia está aprimorando a cooperação em defesa, segurança e econômico-comercial com o Vietnã para consolidar a parceria estratégica e limitar a influência da China no país. A análise destaca a importância estratégica do Vietnã para abordar os interesses econômicos e de segurança da Índia na região do Mar da China Meridional, ao mesmo tempo em que contrabalança a crescente assertividade da China. O estudo conclui que o Vietnã desempenha um papel crucial na Política de Ação para o Leste da Índia, ajudando a Índia a aprimorar sua presença marítima, integração econômica e cooperação em segurança na região Indo-Pacífico.

Palavras-chave: Índia. Vietnã. China. Política do Leste Asiático. Sudeste Asiático.

## ABSTRACT

India and Vietnam established a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in 2016. Both countries are important pillars in each other's regional and global policies and strategies. In particular, Vietnam plays a very significant role in India's Act East Policy since its announcement by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in 2014. This paper mainly utilizes qualitative analysis methods through secondary data sources to clarify Vietnam's position and role in India's Act East Policy in

the face of challenges from China. The results show that India is enhancing defense-security and economic-trade cooperation with Vietnam to consolidate the strategic partnership and limit China's influence in the country. The analysis highlights Vietnam's strategic importance in addressing India's security and economic interests in the South China Sea region, while counterbalancing China's growing assertiveness. The study concludes that Vietnam plays a crucial role in India's Act East Policy, helping India enhance its maritime presence, economic integration, and security cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region.

Keywords: India. Vietnam. China. Act East Policy. Southeast Asia.

## RESUMEN

India y Vietnam establecieron una Asociación Estratégica Integral en 2016. Ambos países son pilares importantes en las políticas y estrategias regionales y globales de cada uno. En particular, Vietnam desempeña un papel muy significativo en la Política de Actuar hacia el Este de la India desde su anuncio por el Primer Ministro Narendra Modi en 2014. Este documento utiliza principalmente métodos de análisis cualitativos a través de fuentes de datos secundarios para aclarar la posición y el papel de Vietnam en la Política de Actuar hacia el Este de la India frente a los desafíos de China. Los resultados muestran que India está mejorando la cooperación en materia de defensa, seguridad y economía-comercio con Vietnam para consolidar la asociación estratégica y limitar la influencia de China en el país. El análisis destaca la importancia estratégica de Vietnam para abordar los intereses económicos y de seguridad de la India en la región del Mar de China Meridional, al tiempo que contrarresta la creciente asertividad de China. El estudio concluye que Vietnam desempeña un papel crucial en la Política de Actuar hacia el Este de la India, ayudando a la India a mejorar su presencia marítima, la integración económica y la cooperación en materia de seguridad en la región del Indo-Pacífico.

Palavras-chave: India. Vietnam. China. Política de Actuar hacia el Este. Sudeste Asiático.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

The Indo-Pacific region is undergoing profound and complex transformations due to the intensifying strategic competition among major powers. Within this context, the rivalry between India and China has emerged as one of the most significant dynamics—second only to the U.S.-China competition in terms of scale and influence (Kiet & Tuyen, 2023). This competition is particularly pronounced in Southeast Asia, a region comprising some of the most dynamic emerging economies of the 21st century (Saha, 2022). As two rising powers with global ambitions, India and China are actively reshaping the political and security architecture of the region.

According to the International Monetary Fund (IMF, 2024), both India and China rank among the fastest-growing economies in the world, with India's GDP reaching USD 3.75 trillion and China's GDP reaching USD 17.52 trillion. These economic projections indicate sustained growth for both nations throughout the 21st century. However, bilateral relations between India and China remain fraught with historical tensions, particularly unresolved border disputes and security concerns regarding water resources linked to the Tibetan Plateau (Kiet,

2023). A core cause of their divergent strategic perspectives is the prolonged border dispute. The 1962 Sino-Indian War and subsequent skirmishes have left deep scars and mutual distrust. Areas such as Aksai Chin and Arunachal Pradesh continue to be flashpoints in the bilateral relationship (Walker, 2025). These strategic differences often stem from how each country perceives its historical and cultural position in the region. For instance, China views Tibet as an inseparable part of its territory, while India maintains historical and cultural ties to the region. India and China also differ significantly in their relationships with neighboring countries. India is often regarded as a democratic power in South Asia, whereas China exerts stronger economic influence across many regions. These enduring tensions, coupled with geographic proximity and competing great power ambitions, have led the two countries into a persistent cycle of strategic rivalry.

Against this backdrop, India–Vietnam relations have become increasingly significant, particularly within the framework of India’s Act East Policy (AEP). This article seeks to examine Vietnam’s strategic role in supporting India’s efforts to respond to the China challenge in Southeast Asia. The India–China strategic rivalry is not limited to Southeast Asia but is also deeply embedded in bilateral history and regional dynamics in South Asia. This study is grounded in the theoretical traditions of neorealism and complex interdependence, providing a dual lens to understand the evolution of India’s regional strategy and its implications for India–Vietnam relations.

From a neorealist perspective, states are primarily concerned with survival and relative power in an anarchic international system (Waltz, 1979). In this context, India’s transition from the Look East Policy (LEP) to the Act East Policy (AEP) can be interpreted as a strategic response to the growing influence of China in the Indo-Pacific region, particularly in Southeast Asia. Neorealism explains India’s increasing alignment with Vietnam as part of a broader balancing strategy aimed at countering China’s assertiveness and preserving a favorable balance of power in the region.

Simultaneously, the framework of complex interdependence (Keohane & Nye, 1977) offers a complementary approach that acknowledges the growing importance of economic, institutional, and strategic linkages between states. The deepening of India–Vietnam cooperation in trade, defense, and multilateral engagement through ASEAN-led mechanisms reflects a shift towards more diversified and institutionalized forms of interaction. In this view, India’s strategic interests are not only shaped by hard power calculations but also by the need to embed itself in regional economic and diplomatic networks to enhance its influence and resilience.

By integrating these two perspectives, this study seeks to capture the dynamic interplay between traditional power politics and the increasingly interconnected nature of contemporary international relations in the Indo-Pacific. This theoretical framework enables a more nuanced understanding of India’s evolving regional posture and the strategic role of Vietnam within it.

India's contemporary strategy toward Southeast Asia is articulated through the Act East Policy (AEP), introduced by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in 2014. The AEP marks a shift from the earlier Look East Policy (LEP), reflecting a more proactive and multidimensional approach to regional engagement. Within this strategic framework, Vietnam plays a pivotal role, particularly in enhancing India's economic and security cooperation with ASEAN. Complementary policies such as the Indo-Pacific Strategy and the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative should also be considered (Cuong & Linh, 2023).

This study examines the strategic evolution from India's Look East Policy (LEP) to the Act East Policy (AEP) and how this policy shift has shaped India's defense, security, and economic cooperation with Vietnam. The central research question guiding this inquiry is: "how does the transition from India's Look East Policy (LEP) to the Act East Policy (AEP) reflect the country's evolving strategic interests in Southeast Asia, and in what ways has this shift influenced India-Vietnam cooperation in defense, security, and trade in response to regional dynamics, particularly China's assertiveness?"

By integrating historical analysis with contemporary developments, this study explores Vietnam's role as a strategic partner and an enabling factor in advancing India's long-term objectives in Southeast Asia and the broader Indo-Pacific region.

## 2 OVERVIEW OF THE HISTORY AND CIRCUMSTANCES BEHIND INDIA'S LEP

By the late 1990s, China had openly expanded its sphere of influence into South Asia and the Indian Ocean region, significantly impacting India's traditional security and strategic position in these areas. During this period, India undertook "comprehensive economic reforms aimed at global integration, liberalization, and the development of multilateral and global trade relations in 1991" (Nghì & Nghia, 2013). Simultaneously, former Prime Minister Narasimha Rao introduced the LEP as a key component of India's foreign policy and strategic vision in the new era of the New Delhi government. This policy had four main objectives: (1) Strengthening market connectivity and expanding economic and trade cooperation with countries in Southeast Asia; (2) "Building an economic corridor extending from South Asia to the Pacific Ocean, driving development in India's remote and impoverished northeastern region and the Indian economy as a whole" (Hai, 2017, p. 35); (3) Increasing influence over Southeast Asian countries, while promoting a peaceful and stable regional order; (4) "Indirectly counterbalancing China's policies and strategies being implemented in Southeast Asia, especially in Myanmar" (Paode, 2013). India's LEP can be divided into two phases:

### 2.1 Phase 1 (1991–2003): Foundational Engagement

This initial phase emphasized political and economic engagement with ASEAN. India prioritized diplomacy, multilateral cooperation, and institutional integration. In 1995, it became a full dialogue partner of

ASEAN and joined the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in 1996, marking its entry into regional security dialogues. India also began asserting its maritime presence by forging naval partnerships with key coastal states, including Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, and Vietnam (Binh, 2013). In 2003, India signed a Joint Defense Treaty with Singapore, deepening military-to-military ties, particularly in naval operations aimed at securing vital maritime chokepoints like the Strait of Malacca.

### *2.2 Phase 2 (2003–2014): Expansion and Consolidation*

This phase witnessed the expansion of India's engagement into East Asia, including Japan, South Korea, China, and Oceania, such as Australia and New Zealand (Liem & Thao, 2021). Unlike the initial phase, which focused on political and maritime initiatives, the second phase placed a stronger emphasis on economic integration. Key milestones in this phase include: (1) The India-ASEAN Framework Agreement on Comprehensive Economic Cooperation in 2003, laying the foundation for the liberalization of trade in goods, services, and investment; (2) the ASEAN-India Trade in Goods Agreement (AITIG) in 2009, aimed at eliminating tariff and non-tariff barriers; (3) the ASEAN-India Investment and Services Agreement in 2014, further deepening regional financial cooperation and service sectors (Mai & Hang, 2021).

India also participated in negotiations for the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) in 2011, although it withdrew from the agreement in 2019. This shift impacted India's position and role in Southeast Asia. Nonetheless, India was prepared to reduce tariff barriers with ASEAN countries. In response, Southeast Asian nations encouraged India to play a larger balancing role in the regional security architecture. The convergence of interests between India and ASEAN, particularly concerning security and freedom of navigation, paved the way for deeper political and defense cooperation (Lan, 2018).

Recognizing the changing dynamics in the Indo-Pacific region, on November 12, 2014, at the ASEAN-India Summit, Prime Minister Modi officially announced the shift from the Look East Policy (LEP) to the Act East Policy (AEP), marking a reorientation of India's foreign policy towards Southeast Asia. Modi declared, "An era of industrialization, economic growth, and trade is beginning in India. India's Look East Policy is now the Act East Policy" (Muni & Mishra, 2019). The Act East Policy inherited and expanded upon the goals of the LEP, with a focus on: (1) strategic partnerships with key countries in the region (particularly Vietnam); (2) maritime presence in disputed areas such as the South China Sea; (3) regional integration through ASEAN mechanisms; (4) direct balancing against China's increasing assertiveness in Southeast Asia (Sang, 2022).

Prime Minister Modi's diplomatic efforts, which included high-level visits to 8 of the 10 ASEAN countries (except Cambodia and Brunei, where visits were made by the Deputy Prime Minister or Foreign Minister), and the elevation of relations to Comprehensive Strategic Partnerships (CSP) with Vietnam, Singapore, and Malaysia, demonstrated India's strong commitment to the region. The emphasis on maritime

cooperation and support for UNCLOS norms highlighted India's position as a maritime power based on international law, in contrast to China's coercive actions (Trong, 2017).

In 2014, India officially acknowledged the importance of maintaining maritime security and freedom of navigation, respecting the sovereignty of nations in the South China Sea in the joint statement between former U.S. President Barack Obama and Prime Minister Narendra Modi. When China deployed the Haiyang Shiyou 981 drilling rig into Vietnam's sovereign waters in May 2014, Prime Minister Modi expressed support for Vietnam, stating: *"For peace and stability in the South China Sea, all nations must adhere to international principles and laws, including the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) of 1982 and the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC) of 2002"* (Liem & Thao, 2021).

The AEP has been successfully demonstrated through the Comprehensive Dialogue Partnership between India and ASEAN. This relationship has evolved from a sectoral dialogue partner in 1992, to a full partner in 1995, and further upgraded to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in 2022 (Statements, 2022). Not only has this partnership driven bilateral trade, with total trade reaching over 110 billion USD in 2022 (VNTR, 2024), but India has also actively engaged in ASEAN-led mechanisms such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the East Asia Summit (EAS), and the Expanded ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting (ADMM+) (Nanda, 2022). These efforts aim to ensure peace, security, and stability in the region, while also witnessing India's strong rise on the international political stage.

Through the Comprehensive Asia Development Plan (CADP), India has developed Asia connectivity—by road, rail, sea, and air—approved by the relevant governments in 2015, such as the India-Myanmar-Thailand Economic Corridor (IMT). India has built "strategic trust" as a rising peaceful power, capable of making significant contributions to a peaceful and prosperous world (Trong, 2023). The flexible, "consensus-based" cooperation model helps mitigate conflicting interests, create harmony, and contribute to building strategic trust with ASEAN. This development philosophy of India is partly inspired by the tradition of harmony in Hinduism, which has helped the country shape an image as a respectful and cooperative partner in the development process, particularly in Southeast Asia. As a result, the AEP has been highly regarded by ASEAN and the international community for its role in promoting multilateralism and creating a security, peace, and freedom of navigation environment in Southeast Asia.

### 3 VIETNAM'S POSITION AND ROLE IN INDIA'S AEP AMID THE CHALLENGES FROM CHINA

Vietnam and India are bound by deep-rooted historical, friendly, and traditional ties stemming from both nations' struggles for independence from colonial rule in the 20th century. The timeless and transcendent nature of this relationship reflects a close spiritual and ideological

affinity forged through shared challenges in the past (Uyanaev, 2022). This commonality provides a solid foundation for the two countries to continually consolidate and advance comprehensive cooperation across various domains. The relationship between the two peoples was founded by the great leaders of the global independence movements, President Ho Chi Minh and Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, and has been nurtured by subsequent generations of leadership and the nations' populations (Cuong & Linh, 2023). Moreover, Vietnam and India share numerous cultural, artistic, and religious similarities, as well as convergent perspectives on traditional and non-traditional security issues unfolding regionally and globally. The mutually beneficial foreign policy interests and long-standing friendship “have enabled Vietnam and India to cooperate in constructing and developing an enduring, transparent relationship between the two Asian nations” (Liem & Thao, 2021, p. 24).

Under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Vietnam is a country with a very important geo-strategic position for India's AEP in the Southeast Asian region, especially in the East Sea area. According to estimates by the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) (2020): “About 80% of global trade by volume and 70% by value is transported by sea. Of this, around 60% of maritime trade passes through Asia and the East Sea plays an important role, accounting for an estimated one-third of global freight movement”.

The East Sea region is particularly important for the supply chains of countries with geographic locations adjacent to the sea in the Northeast Asian region such as China, Taiwan, Japan, and South Korea. These countries all rely on maritime transportation through the Strait of Malacca, connecting to the East Sea and expanding to the Pacific Ocean and the Indian Ocean. For India, “maritime transportation in the East Sea through the Strait of Malacca accounts for 55% of India's total 92-95% of global merchandise trade” (Liem & Thao, 2021, p. 45). In particular, the rise of the Indian economy has created an energy shortage for national development needs. As a result, 85% of New Delhi's oil imports are transported by sea, and cooperation in oil exploration with countries in the East Sea is one of the important energy sources for India's energy security, especially cooperation in oil exploration with Vietnam (Chakraborty, 2022). Therefore, the East Sea plays an extremely important role in India's security policy and national interests in the 21st century. Realizing China's “hegemonic” actions regarding Vietnam's sovereignty over islands in the East Sea region, on July 19, 2010, at the ASEAN Regional Forum held in Hanoi, New Delhi for the first time publicly expressed its position in support of the East Sea issues: “The East Sea is an important maritime route, India supports freedom of navigation in the East Sea” (Nghì & Nghia, 2013).

On July 12, 2016, immediately after the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) is ruling on the East Sea case, India called on China to comply with the principles and international laws based on the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), the 2002 Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the East Sea (DOC), calling for an end to activities that could complicate or escalate the dispute, affecting regional peace (Liem & Thao, 2021, p. 75). This affirms India's

position of participating in maintaining a peaceful environment and freedom of navigation in the East Sea region, while increasing India's influence and presence to limit China's expanding power in this region. On July 16, 2020, as the two powers of the US and China were arguing over Beijing's claims in the East Sea, Indian Foreign Ministry spokesman Anurag Srivastava stated:

"The East Sea is a part of the global commons. India has an abiding interest in peace and stability in the region. We firmly stand for the freedom of navigation and overflight and unimpeded lawful commerce in these international waterways, in accordance with international law, notably UNCLOS" (Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, 2020).

The statement was made after Australia - a major power in the Indo-Pacific - strongly voiced its support for the internationalization and freedom of navigation in the East Sea. At the 17th ASEAN-India Summit held virtually on November 13, 2020, Prime Minister Narendra Modi continued to call for *"all parties (China) to fully implement the DOC, expedite the finalization of an effective and substantive COC consistent with international law and the 1982 UNCLOS"* (Anh, 2020). On June 16, 2022, at the ASEAN-India Special Foreign Ministers' Meeting, Indian Foreign Minister Subramanyam Jaishankar reiterated India's support for ASEAN's efforts to promote dialogue and confidence-building, and the full and effective implementation of a substantive, effective, and effective COC in accordance with international law and UNCLOS 1982 (Government Newspaper, 2022). At the 18th Session of the Vietnam-India Joint Committee on Economic, Commercial, Scientific and Technological Cooperation on October 16, 2023, Indian Foreign Minister Subramanyam Jaishankar affirmed his support for ASEAN's central role and ASEAN's fundamental principles in addressing regional issues, including the East Sea issue (Vietnam News Agency, 2023). Therefore, in order to promote strategic interests in the East Sea region and economic and trade interests in Southeast Asia, Vietnam plays an extremely important role in India's AEP under Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

#### 4 STRENGTHENING INDIA-VIETNAM DEFENSE TIES TO COUNTER CHINA'S ASSERTIVENESS IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA .....

In the Indo-Pacific region, Vietnam is the country most severely affected by China's strategy of expanding its power by asserting the "nine-dash line" claim in the East Sea. The Beijing government has imposed unorthodox "historical evidence" regarding maritime sovereignty over countries in the East Sea in an attempt to control global "trade intersections", demonstrate its "hegemonic" power, and pose a serious threat to the security and sovereignty of countries in the region. This has strongly influenced the globalization and internationalization trend of vital maritime routes on the oceans. Therefore, the power imbalance between China and Vietnam has created a power imbalance between the two countries in the region. With its overwhelming strength, the Beijing government has made unorthodox claims regarding Vietnam's sovereignty over islands in the East Sea. China's "hegemonic" actions have increased

instability, tensions, and confrontation between countries with conflicting interests with China. Particularly, the incident on May 1, 2014, when China deployed the Haiyang Shiyou 981 oil rig in the East Sea area, escalated tensions in Vietnam-China relations in this region. According to the recent report of the U.S Department of Defense (2023) Report on Military and Security Developments Involving China, it noted China's recent aggressive actions:

“The People's Republic of China (PRC) continues to challenge foreign military activities in its exclusive economic zone (EEZ) in a manner that is inconsistent with the rules of customary international law as reflected in the UNCLOS. At the same time, the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) conducts activities in the EEZs of other countries, including the United States, Australia, Philippines, Vietnam, and Malaysia” (U.S. Department of Defense, 2023).

Therefore, although Vietnam has always sought to maintain a friendly neighborly relationship with China, it has also strengthened bilateral relations with other countries around the world, especially with major powers that have strategic interests in this region such as India, US, Japan, South Korea, and Australia (Thayer, 2016). At the same time, Vietnam has strengthened multilateral cooperation and global integration, supporting the role of the United Nations as a supranational government to protect interests, maintain peace, and create an equal legal environment to maintain regional and international security and stability. This is to ensure that all countries are treated fairly and adhere to international rules, ensuring freedom of navigation in the East Sea. The rise of China, accompanied by its assertive and aggressive policies in the region, has compelled neighboring countries to respond to emerging threats to their security. China's expansive and often illegitimate maritime claims in the South China Sea have contributed to a volatile and uncertain security environment in Southeast Asia. Notably, in September 2012, the Indian naval vessel *INS Airavat* was challenged by the PLA Navy while transiting through Vietnamese waters, further reinforcing India's strategic imperative to deepen maritime cooperation and interoperability with Vietnam. In 2014, Vietnam extended India's lease of two oil blocks in the South China Sea—an action that clearly drew disapproval from China. In 2016, despite the ruling of the Permanent Court of Arbitration, China maintained its hardline approach in the South China Sea. India, sharing a similar position with Vietnam, has consistently supported freedom of navigation, adherence to international law—particularly the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS)—and has continued its oil and gas exploration activities within Vietnam's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), even expanding to new blocks despite Chinese objections (Anand, 2017).

Furthermore, the South China Sea serves as a principal maritime conduit to the Pacific Ocean. China's territorial claims over this body of water would directly impact India, particularly if Beijing begins to enforce its sovereignty assertions. Historically and culturally, the South China Sea—and Southeast Asia more broadly—constitute an integral part of India's civilizational footprint. Any hegemonic control by China over the South China Sea would effectively constrain India's ability to pursue its “Act East” Policy with strategic autonomy. Consequently, India's objective must be to ensure that the South China Sea remains a global commons.

Additionally, both Vietnam and India are heavily dependent on maritime routes to sustain their economic vitality. Their geographical positioning confers upon them the responsibility of safeguarding international sea lines of communication in the Indian and Pacific Oceans, including the South China Sea. India's Maritime Military Strategy of 2015—as well as its earlier version in 2007—explicitly identifies the South China Sea as a region of strategic interest. As such, New Delhi is a stakeholder in the evolving security dynamics of the South China Sea.

As a result, the East Sea has become “*an inseparable part of India's security necklace*” (Anh & Van, 2017). This has provided an impetus for New Delhi's strong intervention in the region to prevent a scenario where the entire East Sea falls under China's control, directly threatening India's vital interests along the maritime routes passing through the East Sea. According to Huynh Tam Sang's (2022) study on the drivers behind India's intervention in the East Sea: “*The main factors driving India's presence in the East Sea are the rise of China in the disputed waters, India's pragmatic interests in those waters, and the increasing strategic weight of the Indo-Pacific region*”.

Therefore, China's “hegemonic”<sup>4</sup> actions have led to the vigilance of Indian leaders, prompting New Delhi to intervene in this region to protect its interests and curb Beijing's “hegemonic” ambitions in the coastal areas of Southeast Asia. As a result, India has strengthened defense and security cooperation with Vietnam and engaged in East Sea issues with three main objectives: (1) Ensuring peace, stability in the region and keeping vital maritime routes open and free; (2) Building and maintaining a close relationship with Vietnam to curb the scope of China's expanding power in the East Sea and Southeast Asia regions, counterbalancing China's strategies to encircle and contain India in South Asia and the Indian Ocean; (3) Increasing India's presence in the East Sea region with the desire to demonstrate its rising power status with a peaceful tendency, in contrast to China's assertiveness.

Prior to establishing the CSP (9/2016), defense and security cooperation between Vietnam and India had achieved notable successes through statements, memoranda of understanding, and leadership visits between the two countries in the past. Before upgrading to the CSP, in 1980, India opened a Defense Attaché Office in Vietnam. In return, Vietnam opened a Defense Attaché Office in India in 1985. During the visit of Defense Minister George Fernandes to Vietnam in 2000, the two sides signed a Defense Cooperation Agreement, creating a more comprehensive mechanism for regular discussions between the two countries Defense Ministers, joint naval exercises between the two navies and coast guard forces, as well as India assisting in training pilots for Vietnam (Ha, 2019, p. 215). The year 2003 marked a new development in defense and security cooperation when the two sides signed the “Joint Declaration on the Comprehensive Cooperative Framework between the Socialist Republic of Vietnam and the Republic of India”, in which defense and security cooperation was seen as a key pillar in the relationship between the two countries (Mai & Hang, 2021). The July 2007 Strategic Partnership Agreement further solidified this relationship by providing a framework to enhance

4. The term 'hegemonic ambitions' is widely used in studies and analytical writings on China's policies and strategies to describe its aspirations to expand dominant influence and exert regional control. Example, Articles on Peace Diplomacy (2025), OFCS (2024), DW (2019), and IGI Global (2023) all use this phrase to describe China's actions and policies in the Indo-Pacific region.

cooperation in the defense sector. The agreement commits both countries to strengthen their ties across political, security, defense, cultural, scientific, and technological domains. Civil nuclear cooperation, regional security enhancement, counterterrorism collaboration—including addressing transnational crime and drug trafficking challenges—are integral components of this strategic partnership. According to Ha (2019, p. 217), during the period spanning from 2005 up to 2007, Vietnam sent over 100 military officers to participate in training programs at Indian defense institutions and educational facilities. In June 2005, the Indian Navy facilitated the transportation of 150 tons of military equipment intended for Vietnam's Petya submarine chasers and Osa-II missile boats.

In 2013, representatives from the two Defense Ministries signed the "Agreement on Mutual Protection of Classified Information Exchange and Memorandum of Understanding on Training of Vietnamese Navy and Air Force Officers", with both leaders agreeing on the "determination to jointly maintain peace, stability, freedom of navigation in the East Sea, not using or threatening to use force, and resolving disputes through peaceful negotiations based on international law, including UNCLOS" (Ha, 2019, p.230). During Prime Minister Nguyễn Tấn Dũng's visit to India in October 2014, Prime Minister Narendra Modi remarked: "Our defense cooperation with Vietnam is among our most important partnerships. India remains committed to the modernization of Vietnam's defense and security forces. This commitment includes expanding our already substantial training programs, conducting joint exercises, and cooperating on defense equipment". In May 2015, the Defense Ministers of the two countries signed the "Joint Vision Statement on Vietnam-India Defense Relations for the Period of 2015-2020", and also signed a "Memorandum of Understanding between Vietnam and India on cooperation and coordination in preventing and combating transnational crimes and terrorism". The aforementioned statement was built on the previous defense and security cooperation mechanisms and procedures between the two countries, reflecting the development trend in expanding the comprehensive strategic relationship between India and Vietnam, facilitating enhanced defense and security cooperation across the three main services: army, navy, and air force; at the same time, the two sides have strengthened cooperation in important areas such as military training, capacity building, and support for defense industry development. In addition, the two sides have signed a "Cooperation Program on United Nations Peacekeeping Operations" and a "Technical Agreement on Sharing of Non-Military Maritime Information" (Lan, 2018).

Defense and security cooperation between India and Vietnam was elevated to a new level during Prime Minister Narendra Modi's State visit from September 2-3, 2016 to upgrade relations to a CSP with Vietnam. Here, Prime Minister Narendra Modi approved a \$500 million Defense Line of Credit (LoC) for Vietnam (Neelakanta, 2016), aimed at strengthening bilateral defense and security ties, in line with the common interests of the two countries in maintaining a secure, peaceful and prosperous environment in the region, kicking off the first important area of cooperation under the CSP between New Delhi and Hanoi. Immediately upon

returning to India after his visit to Southeast Asian countries, according to reports, Prime Minister Narendra Modi instructed Brahmos Aerospace to expedite the delivery of Brahmos missiles to the Vietnamese Air Force (Lan, 2018). By 2017, Vietnam and India had negotiated India's sale of Akash surface-to-air missiles to Vietnam, while signing the "Action Program for the 2017-2020 Period", which emphasized that the two sides need to maintain defense and security cooperation, continue to expand training programs, technical support, preferential credit provision, and strengthen cooperation in responding to current traditional and non-traditional security challenges for the interests of the two countries as well as contributing to building a peaceful, stable, cooperative and development environment in the region and globally (Trong, 2017).

In January 2018, on the sidelines of the ASEAN-India Commemorative Summit marking 25 years of ASEAN-India Dialogue Relations and the 69th Republic Day of India, Prime Ministers Nguyen Xuan Phuc and Narendra Modi held talks to promote bilateral cooperation, in which both sides proposed "*strengthening defense and security cooperation, urging relevant ministries and sectors to make efforts to overcome obstacles in the bilateral cooperation process*" (Dung, 2018). Also in January 2018, the two countries held their first joint exercise under the framework of the United Nations Bilateral Peacekeeping Field Training Exercise in Jabalpur, India. In August 2018, Senior Lieutenant General Nguyen Chi Vinh and the Indian Defense Secretary discussed the purchase of the Akash missile system and Dhruv helicopters for the Vietnamese Air Force, helping enhance the military strength of the Vietnamese Air Force and creating a deterrent capability against regional adversaries (Linh, 2018).

From June 8-10, 2022, Indian Defense Minister Rajnath Singh visited Vietnam to hand over 12 high-speed guard boats under a \$100 million credit line to the Vietnamese Navy, and also signed the Joint Vision Statement on India-Vietnam Defense Partnership towards 2030 and a Memorandum of Understanding on Mutual Logistics Support, aiming to expand the scope and scale of bilateral defense and security cooperation (Saha, 2022). This event marked an important breakthrough in India-Vietnam defense cooperation, helping to deepen and substantiate the two sides' cooperative relationship. On June 17, 2023, during the official visit of Vietnamese Defense Minister Phan Van Giang to India, the Indian Defense Ministry gifted the missile escort ship INS Kirpan to Vietnam, stating: "*This is a testimony to India's commitment to support friendly nations to enhance their position and maritime defense capabilities based on the Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) initiative*" (Thu, 2023).

On July 24, 2023, Indian Navy Admiral Hari Kumar visited and worked with Vietnam's Ministry of National Defense; at this event, the two sides discussed naval training cooperation and affirmed that defense and security cooperation plays an important role, serving as a bridge for the two countries to support and draw closer to each other (Khanh & Tuan, 2023). On December 11, 2023, the Vietnamese Ministry of National Defense, in coordination with the Indian Ministry of Defense, organized the 2023 Vietnam-India Bilateral United Nations Peacekeeping Field

Training Exercise, which contributed to enhancing solidarity and promoting substantive Vietnam-India defense and security cooperation (Thanh, 2023). This shows that defense and security cooperation between the two countries in the 2016-2023 period has achieved positive results and helped both countries strengthen their defense capabilities in the face of new era challenges. Both sides have agreed to continue strengthening defense and security cooperation in the spirit of the “Joint Vision Statement on Vietnam-India Defense Partnership Towards 2030”. These events demonstrate that Vietnam occupies a very important position in India’s AEP under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, through which India-Vietnam relations will become an important link in increasing influence and curbing China’s “hegemonic” ambitions in Southeast Asia.

The fourth India-Vietnam Maritime Security Dialogue took place in Hanoi in August 2024, focusing on enhancing cooperation in areas such as marine scientific research, ocean economy, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR), as well as strengthening coordination between the two countries’ navies and coast guards (Affairs, 2024). Both sides exchanged views on measures to protect critical sea lines of communication, particularly in the East Sea, which faces numerous challenges related to freedom of navigation and adherence to international law.

Earlier, in 2023, India transferred the missile corvette *INS Kirpan* to Vietnam—a symbolic step in enhancing Vietnam’s defense capabilities (Singh, 2024). With access to advanced technologies such as radar, missile systems, and maritime equipment produced by India, Vietnam can acquire high-quality defense products at competitive prices, while bolstering its self-defense capacity amid a complex geopolitical environment. For India, this initiative forms part of its domestic defense industry development strategy, aligned with the “Make in India” policy. This initiative not only helps India reduce its dependence on defense imports but also affirms its role as a reliable partner in exporting military equipment to strategic partners like Vietnam.

Additionally, visits by Indian warships such as *INS Delhi* and *INS Satpura* to Da Nang have contributed to consolidating bilateral defense relations and enhancing naval coordination between the two forces (Singh, 2024). Within the ASEAN framework, both countries have participated in maritime exercises aimed at improving interoperability and responding to maritime security threats in the region.

Cooperation between India and Vietnam in regional forums such as ASEAN and the East Asia Summit (EAS) continues to be promoted through various concrete initiatives, especially in upholding a rules-based regional order and restraining unilateral actions by China. This is also a space where members of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) play an active role, facilitating Vietnam’s engagement in regional security cooperation (Pant, 2022).

At the 20th ASEAN-India Summit and the 18th East Asia Summit in September 2023, the Indian Prime Minister reaffirmed India’s commitment to a free, open, and rules-based Indo-Pacific region. India and Vietnam jointly support these principles and call for enhanced maritime cooperation to ensure regional security and stability. Prime Minister

Modi also emphasized ASEAN’s central role in the regional architecture, promoting interaction between India’s Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI) and ASEAN’s Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP). This clearly reflects India’s stance on elevating ASEAN’s centrality within the QUAD vision.

India’s role in the QUAD is evident in several dimensions. First, India has strengthened strategic cooperation with QUAD member states to counterbalance China’s growing influence in the region. Events such as the Doklam standoff (2017) and the Ladakh border conflict (2020) have propelled India to take a more active role in multilateral security structures. Second, India participates in joint naval exercises, notably the Malabar exercises, to enhance coordination and readiness to protect critical sea lanes. Third, India advances non-military initiatives within the QUAD framework, including cybersecurity, climate change, and humanitarian assistance—areas with potential for cooperation with Vietnam.

From Vietnam’s perspective, support for a rules-based regional order, the protection of freedom of navigation, and peaceful dispute resolution in the East Sea under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) demonstrate strategic alignment with QUAD’s core objectives. In this context, the QUAD provides a potential platform for India and Vietnam to deepen cooperation—not only in security but also in economic and sustainable development—contributing to regional stability and strategic balance.

5 INDIA HAS STRENGTHENED ECONOMIC COOPERATION WITH VIETNAM WITH THE AIM OF BUILDING AN ECONOMIC CORRIDOR EXTENDING FROM SOUTH ASIA TO THE EAST SEA AND EXPANDING TO THE COUNTRIES IN THE PACIFIC REGION .....

In the context of globalization and deep integration among economies in the region and the world, enhancing economic cooperation between India and Vietnam has become an important trend in the foreign policies of both countries, especially since the AITIG was signed in 2009. July 24, 1991 is considered an important milestone in India’s economic history, when the New Delhi government comprehensively reformed the economy towards openness, liberalization and international integration after a long period of pursuing an inward-looking, self-sufficient economic model that India applied before the end of the Cold War era (Singh, 2019). Therefore, to strengthen cooperation with countries in the region, especially with ASEAN, Indian Prime Minister Narasimha Rao (1991-1996) introduced the LEP in 1991 with the aim of enhancing economic relations between countries in the region, and comprehensively developing and deeply integrating with ASEAN economies.

Vietnam played the role of an intermediary linking India with the East Sea and extending towards the major economies of Northeast Asia, the island countries of Southeast Asia, and Oceania (Paode, 2013). This created an economic leverage for the development of the remote and impoverished Northeast region in particular, and the Indian economy in general. Therefore, strengthening cooperation between India and Vietnam

is not simply a measure to promote strategic and political development, but also has economic development significance, especially when both countries are undergoing comprehensive economic reforms, pursuing a peaceful, stable and prosperous regional order that aligns with the common interests of the two countries. During Prime Minister Narasimha Rao's visit to Vietnam on September 7, 1994, he emphasized that: *“India supports Vietnam’s reform efforts and considers Vietnam a particularly important partner. Therefore, India wishes to strengthen cooperation with Vietnam in all fields”* (Paode, 2013).

Thus, the economic corridor originating from South Asia to the East Sea and expanding to the Pacific region has positioned India and Vietnam at the two ends of the link between the two regions, creating favorable conditions for the two countries to cooperate in many areas, especially in the economic field. Vietnam and India have enjoyed a close political relationship since the two countries gained independence and officially established diplomatic relations on January 7, 1972.

However, despite the close political ties, economic cooperation was not a priority in the bilateral relationship between the two countries until 1991. This stemmed from two main reasons: (1) Both countries pursued inward-looking, self-sufficient economic models; (2) Both countries fell into political instability, with Vietnam embroiled in war circumstances, while India had to deal with ethnic crises. Therefore, after Prime Minister Narasimha Rao reformed the economy towards openness, integration, and liberalization, and introduced the LEP in 1991, this marked the first milestone in the economic cooperation between India and Vietnam. In 1992, India and Vietnam established extensive economic relations in areas such as oil and gas exploration, agriculture, and manufacturing (Son, 2022). To promote bilateral trade and investment, the India-Vietnam Business Council was established in 1993. By 1997, the two countries elevated their trade partnership through the signing of the Bilateral Investment Promotion and Protection Agreement (BIPPA). Entering the 21st century, Vietnam-India relations witnessed significant progress in both breadth and depth. In particular, bilateral trade relations were strongly boosted as the two countries opened up and liberalized their economies.

The comprehensive partnership between Vietnam and India has undergone a remarkable development process over the past two decades. In 2003, the two countries issued a Joint Declaration establishing the Comprehensive Partnership, followed by the establishment of a Strategic Partnership in 2007. The signing of the AITIG in 2009 facilitated trade exchanges between the two countries through tariff preferences (Uyanaev, 2022). Additionally, the Maritime Transport Agreement (AST) signed in July 2014 laid the legal foundation for maritime and shipping cooperation between the two sides (Lan, 2018). In 2016, bilateral relations were upgraded to a CSP. Since then, economic cooperation between Vietnam and India has witnessed strong and comprehensive development. Most recently, in December 2022, the two countries signed a Memorandum of Understanding on Cooperation in the Energy and Mineral Resources sectors, creating a legal basis to promote cooperation in these crucial areas

(Vietnam Government Newspaper, 2023). Furthermore, Vietnam and India also cooperate based on other important agreements such as the Mekong-Ganga Cooperation Initiative (MGC). The development of the partnership between the two countries is partly due to Vietnam offering an attractive business environment for Indian companies, with political stability, economic reforms, a large consumer base, and strategic access to ASEAN and Pacific markets.

Table 1: Import-export turnover between Vietnam and India in the period 1991 - 2023  
Unit: million USD

	1991	2001	2007	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Export	24	228	1357	2687	3759	6543	6672	5235	6280	7961	8500
Import	5.5	45	180	2745	3940	4147	4528	4435	6963	7086	5860
Balance of trade	18.5	183	1177	-58	1812	2396	2144	800	-683	875	2640
Total exports and imports	29.5	273	1537	5432	7698	10690	11200	9670	132430	15048	14360

Source: Compiled by the author from the General Department of Customs (Vietnam)

Through the data from Table 1, it shows that the bilateral trade turnover between the two countries is increasing, reaching \$29.5 million in 1991; \$273 million in 2001, an increase of nearly 9.3 times; \$1,537 million in 2007; \$7,698 million in 2017, an increase of 5 times compared to 2007 and an increase of 261 times compared to 1991; nearly \$15,048 million in 2023 and an increase of about 510 times compared to 1991. This figure slightly decreased in 2023 to \$14,360 million due to the impact of a sharp decline in domestic demand due to the global economic recession. Vietnam's trade balance was in surplus during this period, increasing from \$58 million in 2016 to \$2,640 million in 2023. This shows that Vietnam's trade surplus with India is increasing. In general, the scale of Vietnam-India trade has grown rapidly after the two countries established a CSP in 2016. This economic engagement is not merely transactional—it plays a strategic role in shaping Vietnam's broader foreign policy orientation. As Vietnam diversifies its trade partners to reduce economic dependence on China, India emerges as a reliable and complementary partner. This diversification aligns with Vietnam's desire to maintain strategic autonomy in the face of China's assertiveness in the East Sea. In this context, economic cooperation with India functions as a form of "soft balancing," whereby deeper economic ties provide a foundation for broader strategic collaboration without provoking overt military confrontation.

In terms of merchandise trade, India is Vietnam's 8th largest trading partner, while Vietnam is India's 23rd largest trading partner in the world and 4th largest in the ASEAN region (Vietnamese Government Newspaper, 2023). Some of Vietnam's main export items to India include phones, computers, auto parts, coffee, pepper...; imports from India include coal, vegetable oils, iron and steel, machinery, dyes.. (Vietnam Ministry of Industry and Trade, 2023). This indicates that the two economies possess distinct strengths and comparative advantages, thereby facilitating effective trade cooperation and complementing rather than

directly competing with each other. Furthermore, according to the theory of trade complementarity, when two countries exhibit complementary export-import structures, the potential for bilateral trade growth is higher. The complementarity in product composition between Vietnam and India not only enhances bilateral trade volume but also lays the foundation for deeper economic cooperation, promotes the development of regional and global value chains, and elevates both countries' positions within multilateral free trade agreements such as the ASEAN-India Free Trade Area (AIFTA). For these reasons, the current trade structure between the two nations is regarded as highly complementary and holds significant potential for further development. The fact that Vietnam and India are important trading partners for each other reflects their complementary and mutually supportive economic relations. Specifically, *“Vietnam’s GDP per capita of \$4,110 is higher than India’s \$2,500. Meanwhile, Vietnam’s debt-to-GDP ratio (%) is significantly lower than India’s at 46.7% compared to 73.95%, showing a lower degree of dependence on foreign countries”* (Uyanaev, 2022). Additionally, the inflation rate in Vietnam is lower than in India at 3.21% compared to 4.25%, which can partly ensure price stability of raw materials and other costs - an important factor in times of instability (Van, 2022).

Moreover, Vietnam has a slightly lower corporate tax rate of 20% compared to India’s 25.17%, helping businesses pay lower taxes (Uyanaev, 2022). Indeed, Vietnam has demonstrated flexibility in the face of the Covid-19 pandemic by quickly introducing attractive corporate tax rates for large corporations wishing to relocate to Vietnam. For example, *“for eligible large-scale manufacturing projects, the preferential corporate income tax rates of 10% and 20% will be applied for 15 or 10 years respectively”* (Thuy, 2023, p. 196). Foreign businesses also hope that Vietnam will avoid currency risk with low exchange rate volatility. In contrast, the Indian Rupee is considered a “freely floating currency” with a market-determined exchange rate. In addition, in terms of market size, India may easily surpass Vietnam. However, economists also look at the export similarity index, which measures the overlap between countries export baskets and thus their export competitiveness. According to this index, Vietnam has an export basket most similar to China’s, indicating that it can benefit more from replacing China’s export basket. As a result, although India’s economic structure is significantly larger, leading to other benefits such as cheap labor and a large market, Vietnam enjoys notable advantages that help promote stability for investors, despite global volatility.... Thus, the two countries do not compete but complement each other in the global value chain. This is a healthy model of economic cooperation, mutually beneficial for the common prosperity of the two countries. The fact that Vietnam ranks 4th in exports to India in ASEAN also shows that Vietnam has certain competitive advantages. Therefore, trade relations between Vietnam and India can be further strengthened in line with their CSP role in the future.

In terms of investment, as of 2023, India currently has over 400 valid investment projects in Vietnam with a total registered capital of about \$1 billion, ranking 26th out of 141 countries and territories investing

in Vietnam, with Indian investment focusing on oil and gas, mining, energy, textiles, agricultural processing,... (Vietnam People's Police Newspaper, 2023). Notable Indian corporations and companies investing in Vietnam include ONGC Videsh (OVL), Venkateswara Hatcheries, Ruchi Industries, United Phosphorus,... Among them, OVL and Essar Oil have provided and are providing oil and gas exploration services in Vietnam along with Petrovietnam (Liem & Thao, 2021, p. 319). In return, Vietnam also has about 6-9 investment projects in India with a total capital of about \$28 million (Anh, 2022). Vietnamese businesses mainly invest in India in agriculture, agricultural processing and supporting industries. The two countries also focus on infrastructure connectivity and trade facilitation. The launch of direct flights between Vietnam and India in 2022 demonstrates strong political will to promote economic, cultural and people-to-people exchanges between the two countries. In addition, both sides have made and are making efforts to build seaports in strategically important regions to increase maritime connectivity capabilities such as Van Phong Port (Vietnam), Chabahar Port (India)...

Economic cooperation between India and Vietnam in 2023 has made significant progress compared to its inception in 1991. The rapid growth of both economies, coupled with shared interests in bilateral and multilateral cooperation, has created a favorable foundation for increasingly deep economic and political relations. In this context, India envisions its partnership with Vietnam as forming a dynamic and prosperous economic corridor connecting South Asia with the East Sea and extending to markets across the Pacific region. India's decision to withdraw from the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) in 2019 did not diminish trade relations; rather, it prompted India to focus more on bilateral agreements, including cooperation with Vietnam.

In the energy sector, India has made substantial investments in Vietnamese energy projects while supporting infrastructure development aligned with Vietnam's development goals without creating economic dependence. Moreover, both India and Vietnam share the strategic objective of reducing reliance on China within supply chains. According to Bích (2021), "Vietnam is striving to diversify its trade partners regionally and globally to reduce its increasingly serious dependence on the Chinese economy." This opens new opportunities for closer cooperation between the two countries in strategic areas such as energy and trade. Additionally, India maintains its commitment to ASEAN through initiatives like the ASEAN-India Free Trade Agreement (AIFTA), which has reinforced economic ties with Vietnam and supported Vietnam's regional integration and sustainable development process.

However, India-Vietnam relations face challenges, most notably the growing competition from China. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)—a large-scale infrastructure project connecting China with countries across Asia, Europe, and Africa—has expanded its influence in Vietnam, raising Indian concerns about Vietnam's increasing economic dependence on China, potentially undermining Vietnam's sovereignty. Nevertheless, Vietnam has approached the BRI selectively and cautiously, aiming to leverage economic development opportunities without

compromising national sovereignty. Simultaneously, this engagement facilitates New Delhi’s influence through the Act East Policy (AEP) and multilateral initiatives such as the Mekong-Hoang Ha Cooperation and the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF). These frameworks offer alternatives to the BRI, emphasizing sustainable development and respect for national sovereignty. By promoting transparent and responsible development initiatives, India not only strengthens its partnership with Vietnam but also helps shape a more balanced and sustainable regional order to counter China’s expanding influence in Southeast Asia.

Vietnam currently faces serious challenges due to China’s increasingly assertive actions in the East Sea. In this context, Hanoi has proactively established and reinforced strategic partnerships with major powers sharing common interests in the region, including India, the United States, Japan, South Korea, and Australia. The consensus among these countries to restrain China’s hegemonic ambitions forms a crucial basis for building a stable and prosperous regional security environment. On this foundation, the strategic partnership between India and Vietnam continues to be consolidated and developed, reflecting strategic alignment amid China’s rising power and the accompanying security challenges in the East Sea region.

In the context of intensifying strategic competition between India and China, Vietnam has emerged as a key partner in India’s AEP. The India–Vietnam cooperation extends beyond defense and security to encompass economic, cultural, and political domains. This relationship is built on a foundation of historical ties, friendship, and mutual trust, driven by shared interests in maintaining peace, stability, and freedom of navigation in the Indo-Pacific region.

## 6 CONCLUSION

This article explores the evolving dynamics of India’s AEP, focusing on Vietnam’s strategic role within this framework. While China’s increasing assertiveness in the East Sea undeniably shapes India’s regional calculations, findings indicate that India’s engagement with Vietnam is driven by a range of motivations extending well beyond mere geopolitical balancing.

Firstly, economic cooperation has become a cornerstone of strategic engagement, with rising bilateral trade and investment fostering interdependence and regional stability. Vietnam’s position as a maritime gateway and rapidly growing economy aligns with India’s objectives of market diversification and connectivity to the Pacific.

Secondly, historical and cultural linkages between the two countries provide normative direction and soft power to the partnership—consistent with India’s broader narrative of civilizational ties with Southeast Asia.

Thirdly, deepening defense and security cooperation reflects convergent interests in maritime domains, freedom of navigation, and regional stability—without necessarily provoking overt confrontation with China.

Thus, Vietnam emerges as a vital and multifaceted partner in India's Indo-Pacific vision, not only as a counterbalance to China but also as a promoter of a stable multipolar regional order. The India-Vietnam partnership exemplifies how economic pragmatism, cultural diplomacy, and strategic cooperation can converge in pursuit of shared development and security goals. India's AEP, with Vietnam as a key pillar, demonstrates India's strategic recalibration to address China's rise and safeguard its national interests. This cooperation benefits both countries and contributes to regional stability and prosperity.

However, India-Vietnam relations also face significant challenges, including competition from China and differing perspectives on certain regional issues. To overcome these challenges, both countries need to continue enhancing dialogue, building trust, and exploring new areas of cooperation. Therefore, further research is warranted to examine Vietnam's expanding role within India's broader Indo-Pacific architecture, including initiatives such as the Quad and the India-ASEAN Maritime Dialogue. Moreover, analyzing how India balances strategic competition with China while engaging Vietnam may provide valuable insights into emerging norms of asymmetric cooperation in regional geopolitics.

The re-election of Prime Minister Narendra Modi for a third term (Modi 3.0) marks a continuation and likely expansion of the Act East Policy—an essential pillar of India's foreign policy. Amid rapidly shifting geopolitical dynamics, India-Vietnam relations are expected to deepen both strategically and across multiple sectors. Under this new term, India is likely to expand military training programs, defense equipment support, and defense technology sharing with Vietnam. Shared concerns over maritime security and freedom of navigation in the East Sea will continue to underpin bilateral and multilateral naval exercises. Furthermore, Vietnam is emerging as a key regional partner. Priority areas for bilateral economic cooperation include renewable energy, information technology, electronics manufacturing, and logistics. Consequently, India may strengthen its commitment to advancing sustainable supply chains and market diversification. The Modi 3.0 administration is also expected to enhance coordination with Vietnam through regional mechanisms such as ASEAN, the India-ASEAN Forum, the Mekong-Hoang Ha Cooperation, and regional initiatives like the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP). These efforts will not only help balance China's influence but also reinforce Vietnam's central role in India's Southeast Asia strategy.

In conclusion, as India seeks to counterbalance China's influence and protect its strategic interests in the Indo-Pacific, Vietnam has emerged as a crucial partner. The consolidation of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP), underpinned by shared maritime concerns and economic interests, will shape the regional balance of power and contribute to a free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific order.

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