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India ‘Looking East’ via Military Diplomacy

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India’s Prime Minister Narendra Modi, in his first term in office, has taken his proactive style of governance to the foreign office. Recall the Prime Minister’s inauguration ceremony when Modi caught many political commentators off-guard by inviting leaders of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) for his swearing-in. Since then, officials at South Block – seat of India’s Ministry of External Affairs – have been kept busy with a series of diplomatic commitments, both in India’s backyard and further abroad. As the new government’s foreign policy agenda crystallises, it appears that military diplomacy has found new footing in the foreign office. New Delhi is keen to strengthen defence relations with “Friendly Foreign Countries”.

This is by no means a novel approach; in the past, India has endeavoured to use defence diplomacy as a tool to further its foreign policy goals and advance its strategic interests. Despite its nonaligned credentials India has maintained dialogue on security challenges, trained foreign military personnel, made “goodwill calls” as well as conducted joint-exercises and training

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exchanges.² Conceptually, defence or military diplomacy is the peaceful application of a nation's military resources to further its foreign policy objectives. It uses (military) cooperation to change attitudes and establish strategic ties with foreign nations. Thus far, India's defence diplomacy has been focused on training, joint-exercises, repairs and maintenance support, ship visits and student exchanges. However, the new government is keen to enhance the matrix of India's defence cooperation. New Delhi has shown willingness to start exporting indigenously made defence equipment to "friendly" countries in Southeast Asia and South America. This strategy of export promotion has been identified by the Ministry of External Affairs and Ministry of Defence as compatible with India's foreign policy goals; it is also in accordance with the government's new stratagem to industrialise defence production.

Such a strategy of defence export promotion is fairly new to India and there is awareness within the foreign affairs establishment that this policy needs maturing/regulatory controls. The MOD recently issued a 'Strategy for Defence Exports' (SDE) – a five-page document – to standardise operating procedures for defence exports. According to the SDE, the government will constitute a Defence Export Steering Committee (DESC) and an Export Promotion Body (EPB) to harness the commercial and diplomatic potential for military exports.³ The initiative will also make use of the line of credit service to facilitate military sales to foreign countries.

Interestingly, military transfers are set to become a crucial component of India's 'Look East Policy'. Sushma Swaraj, veteran politician and India's External Affairs Minister, has been credited with saying that her government wants to turn India's 'Look East Policy' into "acting East"; and augmenting defence exports to India's ASEAN partners will certainly help galvanise the 'Look East Policy'. India appears to have identified Vietnam as the first beneficiary of its defence export promotion policy. High-profile bilateral exchanges between the two nations have been on the rise. President Pranab Mukherjee's state visit to Vietnam from 14 to 17 September

² Given the high-handed nature of India's relations with its neighbours and the inability to create trust and goodwill, New Delhi was branded as a bully. In order to justify its naval modernisation programme and naval expansion on the eastern seaboard in the 1980s, India embarked on a confidence building exercise – military diplomacy – with its littoral neighbours. See Pankaj Kumar Jha (2011), "India's Defence Diplomacy in Southeast Asia", *Journal of Defence Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 1. p 49.

³ Laxman K Behera, "Strategising India's Defence Exports", *IDS Comment*, 17 September 2014. Available at: http://www.idsa.in/idsacomments/StrategisingIndiasDefenceExports_lkbehera_170914.html

2014 came close on the heels of the Swaraj visit in late-August. During his trip to Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi, President Mukherjee announced a US\$100-million line of credit to Vietnam for defence procurement, and both nations agreed to consolidate energy cooperation. Further dialogue between the two countries has taken place during Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung's State visit to India on 27 and 28 October. Behind the scenes and away from all the pomp and regalia associated with presidential delegations, work continues through diplomatic channels; Foreign Office Consultations (FOC) and Strategic Dialogue at the secretary level are readily backing-up what is now a political and strategically expedient bilateral relationship.

New Delhi remains keen to strengthen defence relations with Hanoi. The joint communiqué coming out of President Mukherjee's visit to Vietnam outlined security cooperation and defence engagement as a crucial facet of the strategic partnership.⁴ Between India and Vietnam there exists already a framework of military and strategic cooperation; indeed, it predates India's 'Look-East' policy.⁵ More recently, India signed a Protocol on Defence Cooperation with Vietnam in 2000 and then followed it up with a joint declaration in 2007. The joint declaration called for the "development of bilateral defence and security ties" and pledged to "strengthen cooperation in defence supplies, joint projects, training cooperation and intelligence exchanges"⁶ This has seen India's naval presence in the region increase over the years. Having expanded their operational reach, warships from the Indian Navy's Eastern Fleet have been operating off the Vietnamese coast in the South China Sea region. The Indian Navy has also been sending its vessels to Vietnamese ports to make 'goodwill visits' as well as to improve inter-operability between the two navies. Indian stealth frigate INS Satpura and fleet tanker INS Shakti visited Da

⁴ Joint Communiqué between the Socialist Republic of Vietnam and the Republic of India (Hanoi, 15 September 2014). Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India website, Available at: <http://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/23997/Joint+Communiq+between+the+Socialist+Republic+of+Vietnam+and+the+Republic+of+India+Hanoi+15+September+2014>

⁵ Pankaj Kumar Jha (2011), "India's Defence Diplomacy in Southeast Asia", *Journal of Defence Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 1. p 57. Both countries were brought closer together following their respective hostilities with China in 1962 and 1979. Thereafter, India posted a military attaché in Hanoi in 1980 and Vietnam did the same in 1985. India also reportedly offered Vietnam defence technology in 1994.

⁶ "Vietnam, India issue joint declaration on strategic partnership", Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Vietnam, Available at: <http://www.mofa.gov.vn/en/nr040807104143/nr040807105001/ns070709091229/view>

Nang from 6-10 June 2013 – they were carrying 1,200 officers and sailors, and INS Shivalik made a three-day port-call in Hai Phong from 5-8 August 2014.⁷

Hitherto, India's defence diplomacy with Vietnam has not gone beyond training, joint-exercises, ship visits and staff exchanges. However, the new government's emphasis on action or "acting east" has led to new elements being introduced in Indo-Vietnamese defence cooperation, namely defence exports. The US\$100-million line of credit, the first to be offered to a country outside South Asia by India, will fund the purchase of four off-shore patrol vessels for the Vietnamese Navy. According to the MEA, the line of credit will "open new avenues for cooperation" between the two countries.⁸

The MEA statement suggests that the government is ready to expand its military transfers to Vietnam. Next on the agenda is the sale of the *Brahmos* supersonic cruise missile, which is a joint-venture between India's DRDO and Russia's NPO Mashinostroyeniya. The missile system, which is a leading-edge technology and the only supersonic cruise missile in production today, has been on Vietnam's wish-list since 2011.⁹ Although Russia has not overtly endorsed the deal, there is little chance of the Kremlin vetoing such an agreement. The Russia-India-Vietnam troika of defence collaboration, though still in its infancy, has already been established. The current trend is for India to train Vietnamese forces while Russia arms them.¹⁰ Such a partnership is effective because it exploits India's experience with Russian-origin arms – the legacy of which can be traced all the way back to the 1960s.

Going forward, India's new policy to encourage defence exports will face international pressures. The supply of leading technologies to Vietnam will give it an effective deterrent and further its

⁷ Embassy of India (Vietnam) website, accessed 14 October 2014. Available at: <http://www.indembassy.com.vn/india-vietnam-relations/bilateral-relations.html>

⁸ Joint Communiqué between the Socialist Republic of Vietnam and the Republic of India (Hanoi, 15 September 2014). Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India website, Available at: <http://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/23997/Joint+Communique+between+the+Socialist+Republic+of+Vietnam+and+the+Republic+of+India+Hanoi+15+September+2014>

⁹ Sridhar Kumaraswami, "India to sell BrahMos missile to Vietnam", *Asian Age*, September 20, 2011. Available at: <http://archive.asianage.com/india/india-sell-brahmos-missile-vietnam-157>

¹⁰ India has already trained Vietnamese sailors to operate Russian Kilo-class submarines that are being inducted into the Vietnamese navy. The Indian Air Force also operates 200 Russian origin Sukhoi-30MKI fighter jets and will help train Vietnamese air force pilots to operate the 36 Sukhoi-30MK2 fighter jets that Vietnam will deploy by 2015.

anti-access/area denial strategy; this will likely antagonise China with whom Vietnam has a long-ranging dispute in the South China Sea. Indian involvement here could further complicate the geopolitical environment. New Delhi will have to walk a diplomatic tightrope and ensure that ‘looking East via military diplomacy’ does not imperil its bilateral relations with China.

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