

## **India's Energy Cooperation with Vietnam in The South China Sea: Seeking Energy Security And Balancing Against China**

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### **Abstract**

*The South China Sea has a remarkable role in cementing India and Vietnam relations, which evolved around their energy and strategic cooperation. Energy resources are an indispensable pillar of cooperation between India and Vietnam. The South China Sea is known for its geopolitical significance. Its continuously growing geopolitical and geostrategic importance became crucial for India, Vietnam, and the world's countries. India has an active presence in the Sea. Given its increasing energy demand and prospects of energy availability in the South China Sea and trade flow through this water body, India wishes to strengthen its presence in the region. This paper examines two research questions: how India-Vietnam energy cooperation has evolved in the South China Sea and the challenges of such energy*

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*cooperation between India and Vietnam. It also intends to explain and understand the role of the Look/Act East Policy in achieving India's strategic objectives in the South China Sea to balance against China. The paper argues that such cooperation between India and Vietnam helped them strengthen their regional strategic objective.*

**Keywords:** Energy Cooperation, South China Sea, India, Vietnam, China, ASEAN

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### I. Introduction

In 1991, India liberalized its economy, provided impetus, and paced the development process. Major fields such as heavy industry, transportation connectivity, service sector, education, health, agriculture, and space witnessed immense improvement.<sup>1</sup> Continuous development across the sectors increased energy consumption in India. However, such a continuously growing population and improving lifestyles added more to energy demand as consumption significantly increased. In post-1991, India experienced economic growth at around eight percent to achieve its social and economic development goals. With seventeen percent of the world's population, India has only 0.8 percent of the world's known energy resources (oil and gas),<sup>2</sup> which is far less considering increasing energy demand. The lack of adequate energy resources to meet its growing demand forced India to rely on energy imports. Indian oil and gas dependency has increased since 2000, and energy use in India has doubled.<sup>3</sup> To meet its increasing energy demand and, at the same time,

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<sup>1</sup> Montek S. Ahluwalia. "India's Economic Restoration: Achievements and Next Steps," *Asian Economic Policy Reform*, 14, (2018): 1-17. <https://doi.org/10.1111/aepr.12239>.

<sup>2</sup> Ashok Sharma. *India's Pursuit of Energy Security: Domestic Measure, Foreign Policy and Geopolitics*. New Delhi: Sage, (2019).

<sup>3</sup> "India 2020: Energy Policy Review," International Energy Agency. January, (2021). [https://iea.blob.core.windows.net/assets/2571ae38-c895-430e-8b62-bc19019c6807/India\\_2020\\_Energy\\_Policy\\_Review.pdf](https://iea.blob.core.windows.net/assets/2571ae38-c895-430e-8b62-bc19019c6807/India_2020_Energy_Policy_Review.pdf).

reduce energy import dependence to some extent, India has been engaged in diversifying its energy supply with a particular focus on energy exploration and production. Indian-owned Oil and Natural Gas Company (ONGC) is involved in energy exploration and production activities in India and abroad. Major countries such as Azerbaijan, Myanmar, Bangladesh, Brazil, and Vietnam strengthen energy cooperation with emerging economies, where ONGC actively engages in energy exploration and production activities.<sup>4</sup> Out of several countries with which India has energy ties, the energy cooperation with Vietnam in the South China Sea region is the most significant as it brings value both in terms of energy and strategy.

With ample oil and gas resources, Vietnam is a developing economy among Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) members. According to the Asian Development Bank, in 2015, Vietnam's crude oil and gas reserve was approximately 4.4 billion barrels and 0.6 trillion cubic meters (Tcm).<sup>5</sup> It ranked Vietnam first in proven crude oil and third in proven natural gas reserves among ASEAN members. Consequently, the contribution of oil and gas to Vietnam's national economy has a large share. Energy (oil and gas) has always been the backbone of Vietnam's

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<sup>4</sup> Sharma, *India's Pursuit of Energy Security*, 10.

<sup>5</sup> "Vietnam: Energy Sector Assessment, Strategy and Road Map," Asian Development Bank, December, (2016).  
<https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/institutional-document/178616/vie-energy-road-map.pdf>.

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economy and has significantly impacted the country's overall development. However, the proven oil and gas reserves in Vietnam's territories attracted foreign investment for oil and gas exploration and production. Vietnam experienced investments between 1988 and 2014 from several foreign companies such as the UK, USA, Japan, Russia, Canada, Malaysia and India.<sup>6</sup> India's state-owned oil and natural gas company, Videsh Limited (OVL), is involved in energy exploration activities in South China's water with the cooperation of Vietnam. Interestingly, Vietnam's most proven oil and gas reserve falls under its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), a part of South China Sea water.

The South China Sea has a significant geographical setting and strategic location regarding its international shipping. It is distinguished not only for the littoral states but for the rest of the world as more than forty percent of the trade of the countries across the globe passes through the South China Sea.<sup>7</sup> The region is immensely rich in hydrocarbon reserves, which have improved

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<sup>6</sup> Le Viet Trung, Tran Quoc Viet, and Pham Van Chat. "An Overview of Vietnam's Oil and Industry," *Petroleum Economics and Management*, Vol. 10, (2016).

<https://www.pvn.vn/DataStore/Documents/2016/Tap%20chi%20Dau%20khi/thang%2010/TCDK102016.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> Martin Stuart-Fox. *A short history of China and Southeast Asia: tribute, trade and influence*. Allen & Unwin, (2021).

<http://ngc.digitallibrary.co.in/bitstream/123456789/236/1/A%20Short%20History%20of%20China%20and%20Southeast%20Asia%3A%20Tribute%2C%20Trade%20%26%20Influence.pdf>

the doubt that the disputed body of water could possess significant potential energy resources. The South China Sea- as per the estimates of the US Energy Information Administration (EIA) – is a critical world trade route and 10 billion barrels of petroleum and petroleum products and 6.7 trillion cubic feet (Tcf) of liquefied natural gas (LNG) passed through the South China Sea in 2023.<sup>8</sup> The prospects of fishing, oil, and gas make it more significant, and it could be one of the main reasons why many non-coastal nations are engaged in this region. Given the geo-political, geo-economic, geo-strategic, and resource richness, non-coastal states are trying to benefit from the area. However, China sees such acts as a direct threat to its territorial sovereignty.

India is a non-claimant and non-coastal country in this region. However, it has a substantial strategic, economic, and geopolitical interest in the South China Sea. Even though the South China Sea region is far from the Indian mainland, it is almost nearby, considering the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. India's approach towards the South China Sea is evident as it supports a stable maritime environment, right to passage, unimpeded commerce, and peaceful settlement of maritime disputes. India's approach towards the South China Sea region maintains that it should increase trade with Indo-Pacific and ASEAN countries, for which

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<sup>8</sup> "South China Sea," U.S. Energy Information Administration., March 21, (2024). Accessed on 10 December 2024.  
[https://www.eia.gov/international/analysis/regions-of-interest/South\\_China\\_Sea](https://www.eia.gov/international/analysis/regions-of-interest/South_China_Sea).

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a calm and undisputed South China Sea is essential. By 2014, more than fifty percent of trade between India and Asia-Pacific countries passes through the choke point of the Malacca Straits to and from the South China Sea.<sup>9</sup> India supports free movement and navigation in the South China Sea and treats it as an international body of water under international law. India is involved in maritime, trade, geopolitical, and energy exploration in this region with outstanding commitment and is supported by some significant coastal states, like Vietnam, the Philippines, etc. Among them, Vietnam, India has an exceptional commitment, and Vietnam Invited India into the water body of the South China Sea to explore oil and natural gas. Energy cooperation has been the central pillar of relations between India and Vietnam, and such cooperation has experienced improvement in recent years.

**II. Methodological note**

The study employed multiple methodologies, including analysis, interpretation, historical-logical methods, policy analysis, comparison, and statistical techniques, to examine the nature of cooperation between India and Vietnam in the South China Sea. Additionally, it utilized both qualitative and quantitative research designs to explore India-Vietnam energy collaboration in the

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<sup>9</sup> David Scott. "India's Extended Neighborhood Concept: Power Projections for a Rising Power," *India Review*, 18, no. 2, (2009): 107-143.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14736480902901038>

region and other factors influencing their energy relations.<sup>10</sup> This paper uses original, primary, and secondary research documents. The data presented in this research are sourced from official documents provided by the governments of India, the Embassy of Vietnam in India, ASEAN, China, the USA, and Vietnam. Qualitative methods are suitable for exploring complex issues and policy concerns.<sup>11</sup> The process of qualitative analysis involves examining data gathered from official papers. Relevant documents, reports, and official publications related to the India-Vietnam energy cooperation are used and analyzed to understand the historical context and policy developments. Document analysis systematically reviews primary and secondary sources to identify key energy initiatives, challenges, and India's energy security concerns. The research findings will contribute to the existing literature on India-Vietnam energy cooperation and its implications on China's behavior. The insights from this study can inform policymakers and energy stakeholders about the potential national security threats arising from inadequate energy security measures and underscore the need for effective policy responses. The research methodology presented above aligns with the research objective of analyzing India-Vietnam energy

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<sup>10</sup> Cuong Pham. "Maritime Security: The Pillar of India's IPOI in Southeast Asia and Its Implications for Vietnam," *Journal of Liberty and International Affairs* 10, no. 2, (2024): 48-73. <https://doi.org/10.47305/JLIA24102048p>.

<sup>11</sup> Norman K. Denzin and S. Lincoln Yvonna. "Introduction: The Discipline and Practice of Qualitative Research," in *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*. Norman. K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln, eds. 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, (2005).

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cooperation and India's balancing act against China in the South China Sea region. It ensures a rigorous and comprehensive investigation of the topic, offering valuable insights for policymakers, academia, and other stakeholders interested in energy security and India-Vietnam energy relations.

### **III. Energy Cooperation**

India and Vietnam's cooperation in the South China Sea (SCS) has evolved significantly, driven by shared economic, energy, and strategic interests. Both countries seek to maintain a rules-based order in the region while countering China's assertiveness. This evolving cooperation reflects the growing strategic importance of the South China Sea to both India and Vietnam and their shared desire to counter China's influence in the region. India's strategic interests, energy security requirements, and dedication to a rules-based maritime order have all influenced the nation's involvement in the South China Sea (SCS). Global trade and energy resources depend on the area, and India's engagement shows that it wants to maintain a balance of power in the Indo-Pacific. During the Cold War, India's emphasis on non-alignment and its immediate regional interests allowed it to maintain a modest presence in the South China Sea. India acknowledged Vietnam's claims to the Paracel and Spratly Islands and provided diplomatic support to the country, especially during

the Vietnam War.<sup>12</sup> However, India started exploring the Sea in the 1980s, coinciding with Vietnam's efforts to open its economy to foreign investment. The United Nations Convention governs the SCS on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). Still, several countries, including China, perceive its interpretation and applicability differently, and it has become a central concern for all the countries involved in the region.

China claims sovereignty over approximately 90% of the South China Sea using the Nine-Dash Line, a demarcation based on historic rights. This line overlaps with the Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) of several Southeast Asian nations, including Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Brunei. The Nine-Dash Line is not recognized under international law or by UNCLOS, as it lacks explicit coordination and legal justification.<sup>13</sup> China's selective adherence to UNCLOS is demonstrated by its position in the South China Sea. It ignored other UNCLOS articles, such as EEZ boundaries and the 2016 arbitration verdict, while citing others, like territorial seas, to bolster its claims.<sup>14</sup> This strategy has increased regional and international conflicts while undermining international law. Stronger international cooperation and

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<sup>12</sup> Huynh Tam Sang. "The Growing Importance of Vietnam to India's South China Sea Policy," *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs*, 5, no. 2, (2022): 133-150.

<sup>13</sup> Sofia Kausar. "Charting contested waters: The South China Sea and competing state claims," *International Journal of Law*, 9, no. 5 (2023): 14-22.

<sup>14</sup> Jonathan Odom. "The Value and Viability of the South China Sea Arbitration Ruling: The US Perspective 2016–2020," *International Law Studies* 97, no. 1, (2021): 16.

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commitment to UNCLOS principles will be necessary to sustain a rules-based maritime order in the SCS.

Given the geostrategic, geo-economic, and geopolitical significance of the South China Sea and several common concerns, India and Vietnam have improved their cooperation in various fields, such as Maritime, defense, energy, nuclear and renewable, education, etc. Both nations are developing economies in Asia and lack energy resources, which compels them to take significant steps to secure energy supplies; otherwise, the states' pace of development would get struck. Vietnam is geographically well-located and has a vast coastline with the South China Sea. Still, it does not have sufficiently advanced technologies to manipulate and extract the resources from the South China Sea. India is geographically far from the South China Sea but is technologically advanced and able to extract, explore, and manipulate natural resources. Elements like historical legacy, Cold War experiences between both countries, cultural bondage between India and Vietnam, and Vietnam's fear of the expansion of China contributed to building the bondage between India and Vietnam, which led to cooperation in various fields. In post-2000, India and Vietnam experienced substantial improvements in energy cooperation, encompassing the joint exploration of oil and gas in the South China Sea. India imports around 2/3rd of its energy needs from West Asian countries, African countries, Mexico, and other countries with uncertain supply

environments.<sup>15</sup> Energy cooperation between India and Vietnam might reduce India's import dependency on Gulf countries and help diversify the energy supply. Energy cooperation between India and Vietnam might reduce India's import dependency on Gulf countries and help diversify the energy supply.

The intended involvement of India in the South China Sea and its energy cooperation with Vietnam is not a new activity. It dates back to 1988 when India successfully acquired an exploration license of block 06.1 in Vietnam's Nam Con Son Basin.<sup>16</sup> ONGC Videsh Limited (OVL) holds 45 percent stakes in block 06.1, Russia's Rosneft has 35 percent, and PetroVietnam has 20 percent. The block 06.1 is considered one of Vietnam's most significant gas sites.<sup>17</sup> It contributes around thirty percent of Vietnam's total natural gas production and immensely helps in power generation. India was allocated two significant blocks, block 127 and block 128, in Phu Khan Basin in 2006 to explore hydrocarbons in the South China Sea.<sup>18</sup> Consequently, by 2012, OVL successfully acquired block 06.1, block 127, and block 128

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<sup>15</sup> Gulshan Deitl. "New Threats to Oil and Gas in West Asia: Issues in India's Energy Security," *Strategic Analysis* 28, no. 3, (2004): 273-389.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/09700160408450143>.

<sup>16</sup> Rahul Mishra. "India- Vietnam: New Waves of Strategic Engagement," *Indian Council of World Affairs*, New Delhi, (2014).

<sup>17</sup> "ONGC Not to Exit Vietnam Block Despite Poor Prospectivity," *The Times of India*, New Delhi, July 12, (2015).  
<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/business/india-business/ongc-not-to-exit-vietnam-block-despite-poor-prospectivity/articleshow/48040450.cms>.

<sup>18</sup> Mishra. "India- Vietnam," 8.

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and invested around US\$ 360 million in all three blocks concerned for acquiring and developing exploration activities. Since India acquired these blocks, OVL has been intensely involved in the allocated blocks to improve hydrocarbon exploration and extraction.<sup>19</sup>

Later, India found that block 127 did not have enough oil, which led India to withdraw from the bloc in 2009.<sup>20</sup> In 2011, China registered vocal complaints against India's involvement in block 128 of Phu Khan Basin's block. China's vocal opposition to India's exploration of block 128 made it controversial, as both China and Vietnam claim that block 128 falls under their jurisdiction. China cautioned and threatened to keep India from entering the South China Sea waters as China declared the South China Sea under its jurisdiction. India announced in May 2011 a temporary withdrawal from the exploration of block 128 after China's protest, citing low prospects of hydrocarbons. Many scholars and Vietnamese officials widely perceived India's move as influenced by China's threat. After India's declaration to relinquish block 128, Vietnam approached India with more incentives and a contract extension to OVL. Consequently, India

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<sup>19</sup> "ONGC Videsh Ltd. Gets 1-Year Extension for Exploring Vietnamese Oil Block," *The Economic Times*, August 23, (2016).  
<https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/industry/energy/oil-gas/ongc-videsh-ltd-gets-1-year-extension-for-exploring-vietnamese-oil-block/articleshow/53827194.cms?from=mdr>.

<sup>20</sup> B.R. Deepak. *India and China: Foreign Policy Approaches and Responses*. New Delhi: VIJ India Pvt. Ltd, (2016).

agreed to continue the joint exploration of block 128 in July 2012.<sup>21</sup> According to international law, both blocks are under Vietnamese jurisdiction, although China claims sovereignty over allotted blocks.<sup>22</sup> OVL, in 2019, sought another two years extension (6th extension) to explore block.<sup>23</sup> India's state-owned company, OVL, has not been able to find any hydrocarbon in block 128. Its desire to stay and invest in block 128 strengthens India's strategic interests in the South China Sea and exploring hydrocarbons.

Both sides made several attempts to improve cooperation in hydrocarbon exploration. ONGC Videsh Limited (OVL) was selected in Vietnam's 2004 licensing Round for nine major offshore block explorations.<sup>24</sup> OVL relinquished some blocks as it faced unavoidable problems regarding oil and gas reserves. An important development occurred during Nguyen Phu Trong's significant visit to India in 2013. Seven oil blocks were offered to

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<sup>21</sup> Utpal Bhaskar. "OVL to Resume Drilling in South China Sea," *mint*, January 08, (2012). <http://www.livemint.com>.

<sup>22</sup> Pranab D. Samanta. "China Puts Indian Oil Block up for Auction," *Indian Express*, July 17, (2012), New Delhi. <https://indianexpress.com/article/news-archive/web/china-puts-indian-oil-block-up-for-auction/>

<sup>23</sup> "OVL Seeks 2-Year Extension for Exploring Vietnamese Oil Block," *The Economic Times*, September 2, (2019). <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/industry/energy/oil-gas/ovl-seeks-2-year-extension-for-exploring-vietnamese-oil-block/articleshow/70946198.cms?from=mdr>

<sup>24</sup> Ganganath Jha. "India's Dialogue Partnership with ASEAN," *India Quarterly*, Vol. 64, no. 4, (2008): 1-34. <https://doi.org/10.1177/097492840806400401>.

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India in the South China Sea based on nominations where Vietnam hoped for a production-sharing agreement. In November 2013, OVL and Petro Vietnam strengthened their energy ties by signing a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) to promote joint exploitation and exploration of Vietnam's hydrocarbon assets.<sup>25</sup> In a significant visit by Indian president Dr. Pranab Mukherjee in September 2014, a joint oil exploration agreement was signed between OVL and Petro Vietnam, giving India and Vietnam more opportunities to strengthen their cooperation in the South China Sea.<sup>26</sup> During the Narendra Modi government's first tenure, several visits took place, and leaders from both sides showed significant commitment to cooperation between the two countries.

In addition to energy cooperation between India and Vietnam in the South China Sea, other fields, such as nuclear and renewable energy, emerged as significant fields of energy cooperation between India and Vietnam. On March 25, 1986, both countries agreed to cooperate in nuclear energy development and peaceful use. In 2002, with the help of India, a nuclear science center called the Vietnam-India Nuclear Science Center (VINSC)

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<sup>25</sup> Harsh V. Pant. "China on the Horizon: India's Look East Policy Gathers Momentum," *Orbis* 57, no. 30, (2018): 453-466.  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.orbis.2013.05.007>

<sup>26</sup> Ministry of External Affairs of India. "Joint Statement: The Third India-Philippines Joint Commission on Bilateral Co-operation," *Media Center*, New Delhi, October 14, (2015).  
[https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/25930/Joint\\_StatementThirdIndiaPhilippines\\_Joint\\_Commissionon\\_Bilateral\\_Cooperation](https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/25930/Joint_StatementThirdIndiaPhilippines_Joint_Commissionon_Bilateral_Cooperation)

was established at Da Lat, Vietnam. In addition, an MoU was signed for atomic cooperation between the Ministry of Science and Technology (MOST) of Vietnam and the Dept. of Atomic Energy (DAE) of India in the same year. India has experience and expertise in the field of atomic energy utilization. At the same time, Vietnam showed eagerness to improve its nuclear energy sector, and such properties created possibilities for both countries for mutual benefit cooperation.<sup>27</sup> In 2019, Indian Vice-president M. Venkaiah Naidu visited Vietnam and signed an agreement with Vietnam's Prime Minister, Nguyen Xuan Phuc, to cooperate in the nuclear and renewable energy sector.<sup>28</sup> Vietnam has grown to be a desirable renewable energy market for Indian businesses. For instance, the Adani Phuoc Minh wind power plant and the Adani Phuoc Minh solar power plant are two projects in Vietnam in which the Adani Group has invested.<sup>29</sup> Vietnam may benefit from the Indian-led International Solar Alliance (ISA) initiative and strengthen its renewable energy sector. International Solar

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<sup>27</sup> *The Economic Times*. "ONGC Videsh Ltd. Gets 1-Year Extension."

<sup>28</sup> Reena Marwah and Le Thi Hang Nga. *India–Vietnam relations: Development dynamics and strategic alignment*. Cham: Springer Nature, (2022). <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-16-7822-6>.

<sup>29</sup> "Trade Facilitation ahead with ASEAN-India deal upgrade," Embassy of India in Hanoi, April 15, (2024). <https://www.indembassyhanoi.gov.in/page/trade-facilitation-ahead-with-asean-india-deal-upgrade-vir/>

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Alliance came to light in 2015 with the efforts of India and France.<sup>30</sup>

The defense sector has emerged as a significant field of cooperation between India and Vietnam. The Ministries of Defense signed the Memorandum of Understanding on Defense Cooperation in 2009, and the general framework was provided by the Joint Vision on Defense Cooperation, signed by the defense ministers in 2015.<sup>31</sup> A new “Joint Vision Statement on India-Vietnam Defense Partnership towards 2030” and a “Memorandum of Understanding on Mutual Logistics Support” were inked by the two countries during the June 2022 visit of India’s defense minister, Mr. Rajnath Singh. The two countries agreed that Vietnam would receive an indigenously built missile corvette, the INS Kirpan, during the visit of General Phan Van Giang, the Vietnamese Minister of National Defense, to India on June 18–19, 2023.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Katyayani Rajawat. “International Solar Alliance: India’s Potentials in Clean Energy,” *International Journal of Academic Research and Development* 4, no. 3, (2019): 32-39.

<https://www.multidisciplinaryjournal.in/assets/archives/2019/vol4issue1/4-1-16-284.pdf>

<sup>31</sup> Temjenmeren Ao. “India-Vietnam Strategic Cooperation: A Key Element in India’s Act East Policy,” *Diplomatist*, March 05, (2020).  
<https://diplomatist.com/2020/03/05/india-vietnam-strategic-cooperation-a-key-element-in-indias-act-east-policy/>

<sup>32</sup> Manjeeti Negi. “India gifts indigenously-built warship INS Kripan to Vietnam,” *INDIA TODAY*, June 19, (2023).

On August 1, 2024, the 14th India-Vietnam Defense Policy Dialogue was held in New Delhi. The two sides discussed various bilateral defense cooperation issues during the meeting. They noted the revolutionary developments in the relationship since the signing of the “Joint Vision Statement on India-Vietnam Defense Partnership towards 2030” in June 2022.<sup>33</sup> when Raksha Mantri Shri Rajnath Singh was in Vietnam. Vietnam suggested five areas of cooperation: staff discussions, service-to-service collaboration, education and training, defense industry collaboration, and delegation exchanges and dialogue. The defense secretary praised the five-point plan and suggested collaboration in new areas of interest for both nations, such as information security, cyber security, military medicine, and submarine search and rescue. In all three military branches—air, land, and sea—defense cooperation between the two nations has dramatically increased. The partnership’s primary focus is training, the defense sector, and visiting ships. Both sides consistently conducted joint military and naval exercises. For example, a joint maritime exercise in 2018 and 2019, a joint exercise in the South China Sea in 2021<sup>34</sup>, maritime exercise Milan in 2022 and February 2024

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<sup>33</sup> Mayank Singh. “India-Vietnam hold first bilateral military exercise involving armies and air force,” *The Indian Express*, November 04, (2024).

<sup>34</sup> “Indian Navy undertakes bilateral maritime exercise with Vietnam People’s Navy,” *Press Information Bureau*, February 24, (2024).

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held.<sup>35</sup> These targeted exercises enhanced cooperation and communication between India and Vietnam.

Maritime security has witnessed a growing field of cooperation between India and Vietnam. In light of China's militarization of the SCS, fostering maritime security cooperation between India and Vietnam helps safeguard Vietnam's economic interests and territorial sovereignty. Addressing China's territorial aspirations and its "String of Pearls" strategy also assists Vietnam and India in finding common ground. In theory, India supports the idea of a rules-based system, permits freedom of navigation in the SCS, and settles territorial disputes amicably.<sup>36</sup> To address security concerns, India started a project in August 2019 to construct 12 speedboats for the Vietnam Coast Guard as part of the India-Vietnam high-speed patrol ship project framework.<sup>37</sup>

India better understands the disputed nature of the South China Sea, wherein a joint venture for oil and gas exploration and extraction between India and Vietnam is in progress. Considering this, India and Vietnam clearly stated that the joint venture is

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<sup>35</sup> "India hosts Milan Naval exercise; around 50 countries participating," *Deccan Herald*, February 19, (2024).  
<https://www.deccanherald.com/india/india-hosts-milan-naval-exercise-around-50-countries-participating-2901095>

<sup>36</sup> Pham, "Maritime Security," 62.

<sup>37</sup> Dinakar Peri. "Rajnath Singh hands over 12 high-speed guard boats to Vietnam," *The Hindu*, June 09, (2022).  
<https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/rajnath-singh-hands-over-12-high-speed-guard-boats-to-vietnam/article65509690.ece>.

purely commercial and peaceful. Both countries issued a joint statement in 2014, which clarified that their desire and determination are to work together for stability and to maintain peace, growth, and prosperity in the region.<sup>38</sup> Both countries believe that the area's freedom of navigation and aviation should not be hampered. They have called all the involved littoral countries to resolve the dispute peacefully by the rules of international law, including UNCLOS. A stable, peaceful, and amicable environment in the South China Sea is in the interest of both India and Vietnam. In addition to energy cooperation, India and Vietnam have extended cooperation to other fields like defense, Maritime, technical, education, and culture. India-Vietnam cooperation faces several existing challenges, which create obstacles in enriching and extending their cooperation.

India's energy cooperation with Vietnam in the South China Sea (SCS) significantly impacts its overall geopolitical strategy and economic security, particularly when it comes to handling tensions with China. Collaboration with Vietnam expanded India's economic influence in Southeast Asia by strengthening trade and investment relations. This is consistent with India's Act East Policy, which aims to include India in the geopolitical and economic framework of the ASEAN region. The area is vital for trade, energy

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<sup>38</sup> "Joint Statement between India and Vietnam during the Visit of Prime Minister to Vietnam," Ministry of External Affairs of India, September 3, (2016), <https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/27362>.

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security, and strategic interests since it contains enormous undeveloped oil and gas deposits. India must, however, strike a balance between its energy interests in the SCS and its overarching objective of containing China's ambition in the Indo-Pacific.

### IV. Challenges to India-Vietnam Energy Cooperation

The primary concern for both India and Vietnam in the post-Cold War period was the need to maintain economic growth, which was impossible without active energy cooperation. Energy cooperation between both countries faces several common challenges, such as the disputed nature of the South China Sea, China's expansionist behavior in the region, the involvement of several major and regional powers in this region, infrastructure limitations, technological gaps, environmental concerns and lack of political willingness to some extent for energy cooperation.

The territorial jurisdiction of the South China Sea is claimed and challenged by coastal states such as the Philippines, Taiwan, Laos, Malaysia, China, and Vietnam.<sup>39</sup> The dispute over the South China Sea involves islands (including Spratly and Parsley),

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<sup>39</sup> Michael McDevitt. "The South China Sea: Assessing US Policy and Options for the Future," *A CNA Occasional Paper*, Centre for Strategic Studies, November, (2014): 1-90.  
[https://www.cna.org/archive/CNA\\_Files/pdf/iop-2014-u-009109.pdf](https://www.cna.org/archive/CNA_Files/pdf/iop-2014-u-009109.pdf)

reefs, and the banks of the sea.<sup>40</sup> Littoral countries' involvement-except China- in the disputed body of water is guided by their interest in maintaining the right of freedom of navigation and aviation, fishing areas, shipping lanes, exploration of hydrocarbons, etc. The overlapping claims by the littoral countries over the region created challenges for those non-littoral countries that showed a willingness to participate in activities, including hydrocarbon exploration and naval exercises in the water of the South China Sea. Because of the disputed nature of the region, the UK's energy company 'British Petroleum' (BP), abandoned the plan of hydrocarbon exploration in a block located between the Spratly Islands and Vietnam in 2007, citing overlapping claims between Vietnam and China. BP defended its intention not to continue with oil and gas exploration to allow the involved parties (Vietnam and China) to resolve the issue.<sup>41</sup> Such a disputed nature of the region has undoubtedly created obstacles for India-Vietnam energy cooperation in the water of the South China Sea.

China claims the entire South China Sea by referring to its 2000 years of historical presence there. It believes that the prospects of hydrocarbon reserves and geopolitical and

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<sup>40</sup> Geoffrey Murray. *Vietnam-Culture Smart!: The Essential Guide to Customs & Culture*. London: Kuperard, (2021).

<sup>41</sup> "BP halts Vietnal exploration plan due China dispute," *Reuters*, August 10, (2007).

<https://www.reuters.com/article/markets/update-2-bp-halts-vietnam-exploration-plan-due-china-dispute-idUSSP242592/>

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geostrategic significance of the region can help strengthen its energy and national security. China maintains that any state carrying out activities, such as navigation, naval exercise, and hydrocarbon exploration, in the South China Sea region, with the help of Vietnam, interferes with China's internal affairs.<sup>42</sup> China claimed that activity of joint explorations for hydrocarbons and naval exercise between India and Vietnam in the water of South China is illegal as the region where Indian companies are active comes under Chinese territorial jurisdiction. After getting two blocks, 127 and 128, in the South China Sea by India, China – since 2011- continuously warned India not to be involved in their water without its permission.<sup>43</sup>

At the start of the second decade of the 21st century, India witnessed increasing Chinese assertion in the South China Sea region against the Indian Presence. In 2011, amid rising tensions, in a significant development, INS Airavat- India's amphibious assault vessel- was stopped by Chinese Naval forces to explain INS Airavat's Presence in 'Chinese Waters'.<sup>44</sup> Similarly, on many

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<sup>42</sup> "India-Vietnam Sign Pacts for Oil Exploration in South China Sea," *The Hindu*, October 13, (2011).  
<https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/india-vietnam-sign-pact-for-oil-exploration-in-south-china-sea/article2532311.ece>

<sup>43</sup> Munmun Majumdar. "India's Stakes in the South China Sea," *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, USA, 3, no. 13, (2013): 242-247.  
[https://www.ijhssnet.com/journals/Vol\\_3\\_No\\_13\\_July\\_2013/28.pdf](https://www.ijhssnet.com/journals/Vol_3_No_13_July_2013/28.pdf)

<sup>44</sup> Indrani Bagchi. "China Harasses Indian Naval Ship on South China Sea," *The Times of India*, September 02, (2011).

occasions, the Chinese authorities openly opposed India's maritime exercise with other countries in this region. Such incidents indicated China's aggressive attitude towards coastal and non-coastal states. China's claims and assertive activities in the water of the South China Sea made India uneasy about exercising its exploration activities.

As India's significant strategic, maritime, and economic partner in the South China Sea region, Vietnam has a continuing claim over a specific part of the Sea. It considers it an Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), which China challenges. Understanding the complexities of the South China Sea, the diversification of energy supply, and India's strategic presence in the region, India avoided China's threat. It decided to continue and enhance regional cooperation with region.<sup>45</sup> In response to China's threat, Vietnam officially stated, "All cooperation activities between Vietnam and another partner, including ONGC Videsh Limited, are under the sovereign right of Vietnam entirely in conformity with UN Convention on the Law of the Sea of 1982."<sup>46</sup> However, In addition, China continuously kept threatening Vietnam against India so that ongoing cooperation between India and Vietnam

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<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/china-harasses-indian-naval-ship-on-south-china-sea/articleshow/9829900.cms>

<sup>45</sup> Pant, "China on the Horizon," 455.

<sup>46</sup> Rakesh Sharma. "ONGC to Continue Exploration in South China Sea," *The Wall Street Journal*, July 19, (2012). <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10000872396390444464304577536182763155666>.

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could be influenced. Through such tactics, China made a compelling alternative to Vietnam and challenged India's ambition to gain regional strategic benefit.<sup>47</sup>

Unlike China's view, the South China Sea is considered by the rest of the world under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) as an international body of water, where no country can claim any sovereignty over the whole area, which is primary countries extensive involvement of countries with different purposes.<sup>48</sup> Cooperation between India and Vietnam faces challenges from countries like the USA, Japan, and Europe. The strategic competition among involved powers for purposes like naval exercises, exploration of hydrocarbons, etc., has increased. Increased competition in the water body of the South China Sea gave littoral countries many options to bargain with the countries involved in the region. The significant involvement of the major regional powers has affected Indian interests and made the area more competitive. In such a case, India needs to balance its position with that of the rest of the ASEAN countries with the help of Vietnam.

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<sup>47</sup> Carl Thayer. "Alarming Escalation in the South China Sea: China Threatens Forces if Vietnam Continues Oil Exploration in Spratly's," *The Diplomat*, July 24, (2017).

<https://thediplomat.com/2017/07/alarming-escalation-in-the-south-china-sea-china-threatens-force-if-vietnam-continues-oil-exploration-in-spratlys/>.

<sup>48</sup> Paul Gewirtz. "Limits of the Law in the South China Sea," *Brookings, East Asia Policy Paper* 8, May, (2016): 2.

<http://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Limits-of-Law-in-the-South-China-Sea-2.pdf>

The need for profound political willingness is a significant hurdle in cooperation between India and Vietnam. However, the need for more political willingness is determined by both domestic and external factors. For India, external factors compelled it to show less political willingness. India initially thought it would not be wise to go- along with Vietnam- to a disputed area of water in the South China Sea, which could provoke China. China's unstoppable aggressive policies and intentions in the region of the Indian Ocean and South China Sea made India think of participating in hydrocarbon exploration and naval exercise activities in the water of the South China Sea.<sup>49</sup> India has slowly but indeed improved its cooperation with Vietnam. The political dilemma still exists among Indian policymakers while dealing with the issue of the South China Sea and India's involvement in the region.

Vietnam is the single and most reliable ASEAN member for India in the Indo-Pacific region. Except for Vietnam, India doesn't find other reliable nations in ASEAN and other organizations in the area with which India has appreciable engagement. In this regard, China has the upper hand as some pro-China countries (like Cambodia) in regional organizations support Chinese interest in the region and favor Chinese

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<sup>49</sup> Premesha Saha. "India Calibrates its South China Sea Approach," *ORF*, Issue Brief 477, (2021).

<https://www.orfonline.org/public/uploads/posts/pdf/20230531123708.pdf>

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aggressiveness.<sup>50</sup> To tackle these obstacles, one must possess diplomatic grace, strategic forethought, and a dedication to sustained cooperation. By removing these barriers, India and Vietnam may be able to develop strong energy cooperation that will be advantageous to both nations strategically and economically. In the post-Cold War period, India improved its ties with ASEAN and Indo-Pacific countries, which helped enhance cooperation between both nations.<sup>51</sup> Look East Policy of India has benefitted, to a large extent, by improving India's ties with ASEAN countries. Vietnam helped India to become involved in the water of the South China Sea. It continuously helped India extend its reach to the other members of the ASEAN and East Asian countries. India's significant initiatives towards energy cooperation portray its intention to enrich its relationship with Vietnam and other ASEAN member states.

### V. The Growing Spectrum of Cooperation

In addition to energy cooperation, India and Vietnam have strengthened their ties in other major fields such as strategic and

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<sup>50</sup> Wen Wang and Xiaochen Chen. "Who Supports South China in South China Sea and Why," *The Diplomat*, July 17, (2017).  
<https://thediplomat.com/2016/07/who-supports-china-in-the-south-china-sea-and-why/>

<sup>51</sup> Ashok Sjjanhar. "From Look East to Look Act: India's Growing Engagement with ASEAN and Beyond," Ministry of External Affairs of India, April 26, (2018),  
<https://www.mea.gov.in/distinguished-lectures-detail.htm?749>.

defense, maritime, and science, technology, and education. India and Vietnam share a robust and growing partnership in the realm of defense and strategic affairs. Their cooperation is driven by shared security concerns, particularly in the Indo-Pacific region, and their mutual desire to uphold peace, stability, and international law.

India-Viet Nam relations were elevated in 2016 to the level of “Comprehensive Strategic Partnership” during the visit of Indian Prime Minister Mr. Narendra Modi to Vietnam; earlier, the relations were designated as “Strategic Partnership.” The development of India-Viet Nam relations is currently guided by a “Joint Vision for Peace, Prosperity and People” adopted by Prime Minister Mr. Narendra Modi and the then Prime Minister Mr. Nguyen Xuan Phuc during the Virtual Summit held on 21 December 2020. Prime Minister Mr. Narendra Modi and General Secretary of the Communist Party of Viet Nam, Mr. Nguyen Phu Trong, had a telephone conversation on 15 April 2022. To support Vietnam in strengthening its defense and security capabilities, India set up a \$500 million credit line for defense cooperation in 2016. Additionally, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi expressed his commitment to establishing a military software park at the National University of Telecommunications in Nha Trang province and pledged an extra \$5 million for the initiative.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Pham, “Maritime Security,” 62.

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In 2022, the two countries celebrated the 50th anniversary of establishing diplomatic relations, and they are working together actively to strengthen their multi-dimensional cooperation further. The two countries agreed that Vietnam would receive an indigenously built missile corvette, the INS Kirpan, during the visit of General Phan Van Giang, the Vietnamese Minister of National Defense, to India on June 18–19, 2023. The two defense ministers met in Jakarta on November 16, 2023, as part of the 10th ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting Plus.<sup>53</sup>

India and Vietnam have a growing maritime security partnership driven by shared concerns about the South China Sea and a desire to maintain a free and open Indo-Pacific region. This partnership includes joint naval exercises, information sharing, and capacity-building initiatives. India has also given Vietnam credit lines to improve its marine security capabilities. India helped Vietnam to boost its defense sector by giving \$100 million in 2014 and \$500 million in 2016. In addition, since 1990, Vietnamese defense officers from all three sectors (air, naval and military) have been getting trained in various defense training centers in India. In a significant strategic move, both nations engaged in conducting maritime exercisesserved as training and capacity-building activities. Recently India and Vietnam conducted maritime

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<sup>53</sup> "India-Vietnam Relations," Embassy of India in Hanoi, (2024)  
<https://www.indembassyhanoi.gov.in/page/bilateral-relations/>

exercises in 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022 and 2023.<sup>54</sup> Enhancing maritime security cooperation between India and Vietnam helped safeguard Vietnam's territorial sovereignty and economic interests in the South China Sea, particularly amid China's increasing militarization of the region.<sup>55</sup>

Cooperation in science, technology, and education constitutes an important area of the India-Vietnam partnership. The two countries have signed several agreements, including the "Exploration and Uses of Outer Space for Peaceful Purposes, IT Cooperation, Cyber security" and the "Framework Agreement on Uses of Atomic Energy for Peaceful Purposes." The Program of Cooperation (POC) in Science and Technology covers wide-ranging areas such as biotechnology, material sciences, ICT, ocean development, pharmaceuticals and medical research, etc. In 2016, the two countries signed an MoU on Information Technology and are working to set up a Centre for Satellite Tracking and Data Reception and an Imaging facility in Vietnam under the ASEAN-India Cooperation mechanism.<sup>56</sup> During his

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<sup>54</sup> Kamlesh Agnihotri and Nirmal Shankar M. "India's Outlook towards South-East Asia and Beyond: 'Changing Tack' in Contemporary Environment," *National Maritime Foundation*, August 22, (2023). <https://maritimeindia.org/20901-2/>.

<sup>55</sup> Pham, "Maritime Security," 48-73.

<sup>56</sup> Embassy of Vietnam. "Promoting India-Vietnam in Science, Technology and Innovation (STI): Perspectives and Prospects," *Research and Information System for Developing Countries ((RIS)*, New Delhi, June 24, (2021). [https://ris.org.in/sites/default/files/Publication/India%20Vietnam%20Cooperation\\_Final.pdf](https://ris.org.in/sites/default/files/Publication/India%20Vietnam%20Cooperation_Final.pdf)

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visit to India in the first week of 2024, Vietnamese Prime Minister Phạm Minh Chính had a fascinating conversation with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi. In addition to cooperation in rare earth mining and processing, information technology development, and IT workforce training in each nation, the two leaders suggested extending collaboration in science and technology, particularly in core technologies, semiconductors, artificial intelligence, and innovation.<sup>57</sup>

### VI. Major Indian Initiatives towards Energy Cooperation

Just after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Indian foreign policy witnessed a shift. After the collapse of the USSR and the sudden end of the Cold War, the balance of power across the world suddenly changed. India needed to redesign its foreign policy priorities in a changed global environment. To increase its reach and strengthen economic, political, and cultural ties with Southeast Asian countries, India launched a significant foreign policy called Look East Policy (LEP) in 1991 under the then Indian Prime Minister Narsimha Rao.<sup>58</sup> This policy has broad objectives, including economic integration with Southeast Asian

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<sup>57</sup> “Vietnam, India to expand cooperation in trade, sci-tech, security-defense: PMs,” *Asia News Network*, August 02, (2024).  
<https://asianews.network/vietnam-india-to-expand-cooperation-in-trade-sci-tech-security-defence-pms/>

<sup>58</sup> Sukh Deo Muni. “*India’s Look East Policy: The Strategic Dimensions*,” ISAS Working Paper, Singapore: National University of Singapore, (2011).

countries, regional connectivity, strengthening political and strategic partnerships, improving security and defense cooperation, cultural and people-to-people connections, energy cooperation, and promoting regional stability. It aimed to extend India's presence in Southeast Asia by knotting security and strategic ties with ASEAN member countries. India also hoped this policy could be essential in making India a notable Asian player. India achieved its first "Look East Policy" in 1992 when it conferred the Sectoral Dialogue Partnership (SDP) of ASEAN. Subsequently, within three years, India became a "complete Dialogue Partnership" (FDP) in 1995.<sup>59</sup>

The "Look East Policy" of India has three significant aspects. First is India's membership in various institutions connected to Southeast Asia. Second, Bilateral strategic and defense agreements between India and significant ASEAN countries like Vietnam, Laos, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, etc. Third, India's increasing maritime activities in the Indo-Pacific and Indian Ocean regions are cited as a 'legitimate area of interest' under India's maritime doctrine of 2004. Look East Policy of India involves the ASEAN countries and the "Rimland states" like Japan and South Korea. Since 1992, India's presence in ASEAN and the East Asian Summit has increased, and it has improved to

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<sup>59</sup> Jha, "India's Dialogue Partnership with ASEAN," 24.

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the status of 'ASEAN-India Summit' and member of ASEAN+3+3.<sup>60</sup>

Vietnam is essential in India's economic, strategic, and political promotion in Southeast Asia. Being a regional power among Southeast Asian countries with its solid financial performance and political stability, it has always supported Indian efforts to engage with ASEAN states. Vietnam was the first country in ASEAN to invite India to participate in hydrocarbon exploration and maritime activities in the South China Sea.<sup>61</sup> Both countries have signed several agreements that created conditions for Indian investors and companies to invest in Vietnam and the South China Sea in fields like Medicine, health and care, transport, information and technology, and oil and gas. Vietnam is considered the most trustworthy state among other ASEAN countries.<sup>62</sup> Strengthening strategic cooperation between India and Vietnam and improving India's presence in the region with the help of Vietnam alerted China.

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<sup>60</sup> Sampa Kundu. "ASEAN-India Partnership at 25," *The Diplomat*, July 07, (2017). <https://thediplomat.com/2017/07/asean-india-partnership-at-25/>

<sup>61</sup> Dipanjan R. Chaudhury. "Vietnam Invites India to Explore Resources in Disputed South China Sea Region," *The Economic Times*, July 12, (2018). <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/vietnam-invites-india-to-explore-resources-in-disputed-south-china-sea-region/articleshow/51123742.cms?from=mdr>

<sup>62</sup> "Official Visit of Vice President to Vietnam, 9-12 May," Ministry of External Affairs, (2019). <https://www.mea.gov.in/outgoing-visit-info.htm?2/1165/Official+Visit+of+Vice+President+to+Vietnam+May+912+2019>.

India's Look East/Act East Policy directly connects to India-Vietnam energy and economic interests. The general consensus is that geographically speaking, Myanmar is India's gateway to Southeast Asia. Still, Vietnam has emerged as India's gateway and serves both countries' interests in geopolitics, security, trade, culture, energy, defense, and other areas. Vietnam has been at the forefront of India's involvement in the region, as Modi claimed when he visited the country in 2014. Particularly in the Indo-Pacific area, both nations pledged to uphold rules-based order and to share concerns about security, sovereignty, and territorial integrity. During Modi's historic visit to Vietnam in September 2016, India and Vietnam signed a "Comprehensive Strategic Partnership" based on shared understanding and interests. With the help of Indian policy, Vietnam-India relations have seen steady expansions over the past few years, especially since the two countries upgraded their ties to a comprehensive strategic partnership in 2016.<sup>63</sup>

The growth of bilateral relations is strategically motivated by the shared strategic ambitions of Vietnam's foreign policy of balance of power and India's Act East policy. India intends to use Vietnam to extend its operations throughout East Asia and maybe the South Pacific as part of its expanding eastward policy. India aspires to have a position in Southeast Asia to oppose China and

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<sup>63</sup> G. Jayachandra Reddy, "Vietnam is central to India's Act East Policy," *The Sunday Guardian*, December 31, (2022).  
<https://sundayguardianlive.com/opinion/vietnam-central-indias-act-east-policy>.

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strengthen its influence in other South Asian concerns while China is growing.<sup>64</sup> The primary cause of the recent sharp warming in Vietnam-India relations is pursuing energy security interests. The energy consumption of a nation increases in tandem with its economic expansion. Vietnam and India are experiencing fast economic growth, and their combined energy consumption is rising annually. Nonetheless, both nations have a pressing need to investigate maritime resources actively. It has been noted that by enhancing and fortifying collaboration with neighboring energy-producing nations and foreign energy-producing nations, the Indian government is addressing the challenging circumstances facing India's energy issues. As a result, the foundation of India and Vietnam's oil and gas development cooperation is the two nations' pressing need for these resources.<sup>65</sup>

China perceives such cooperation between India and Vietnam as a threat to its claim over the South China Sea. With the One Belt One Road (OBOR) initiative and String of Pearls, China is encircling India by constructing Chinese naval bases in the Indian Ocean. Such strategic initiatives by China are considered a direct threat to Indian interests in the Indian Ocean region. However, India's presence in the South China Sea, with the help of Vietnam, is also considered a reaction to China's

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<sup>64</sup> Sharma, *India's Pursuit of Energy Security*, 110.

<sup>65</sup> Linh Do. "New Development of Vietnam-India Relations under Indian's Act East Policy," April 11, (2023).  
[https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=4414615](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=4414615).

involvement in the Indian Ocean. In this context, Vietnam is significant for India as a strategic player in the South China Sea region. In the circumstances of uncertainties wherein world politics is changing quickly, India understands the contribution of Vietnam in achieving the aims of the 'Look East Policy' and its cooperation in strategic benefits in the South China Sea region and beyond. After coming into power in 2014, present Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi- to give sharp- has renamed "Look East policy" as "Act East Policy."<sup>66</sup> This move by the Indian government came almost around the same period when President Barack Obama of the United States declared the plan to 'Pivot Asia.'

Prime Minister Narendra Modi launched the Act East Policy in 2014 to give a more action-oriented focus on Indo-Pacific countries, considering that India needs to be more seriously engaged in the region in economics, maritime, energy, defense, and culture. "Act East Policy" aims to improve and reinvigorate India's ties with the members of ASEAN and East Asian countries. It also aims to eliminate insurgency problems in North-East India and open the region to Southeast Asia, which can help counter China's aggressive foreign policies.<sup>67</sup> India's foreign policy

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<sup>66</sup> Surupa Gupta, Rani D. Mullen, Rajesh Basrur, Ian Hall, Nicolas Blarel, Manjeet S. Pardesi, and Sumit Ganguly. "Indian foreign policy under Modi: A new brand or just repackaging?" *International Studies Perspectives* 20, no. 1, (2019): 1-45. <https://doi.org/10.1093/isp/eky008>.

<sup>67</sup> Amintendu Palit. "India's Act East Policy and Implications for Southeast Asia," *Southeast Asian Affairs*, (2016): 81-92. <https://doi.org/10.1355/aa16-1f>.

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toward ASEAN countries is critical to policymakers as the region is getting more attention worldwide. In 2015, during the 13th ASEAN-India summit in Singapore, India expressed its eagerness to improve its ties with ASEAN. At this summit, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi suggested a mechanism to enhance cooperation: counter-piracy, maritime security, and humanitarian relief between India and ASEAN member countries.<sup>68</sup> The same issues were also discussed at the joint commission of the 3rd Indo-Philippines bilateral cooperation in November 2015 in New Delhi. During this meeting, Sushma Swaraj- the then Indian foreign Minister- expressed willingness and commitment to a peaceful solution to the South China Sea dispute. During this meeting, India and the Philippines asserted the importance of safeguarding navigation in the region. They reiterated the implementation of the parties' code of conduct in the South China Sea of 2002.<sup>69</sup>

In September 2015, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited Vietnam, where the South China Sea issue was again at the center of the discussion between both strategic partners. India's ambassador to Vietnam, P. Harish, indirectly stated that China

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<sup>68</sup> "As it Happened: Modi Addresses ASEAN Summit," *The Hindu*, November 21, (2015).

<https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/Prime-Minister-Narendra-Modi-four-day-visit-to-Malaysia/article60297281.ece>.

<sup>69</sup> Ministry of External Affairs of India, "Joint Statement between India and Vietnam during the Visit of Prime Minister to Vietnam."

needs to respect the Hague Tribunal's verdict on the South China Sea dispute.<sup>70</sup> India believes that the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) represents the essential aspect of international law on the Sea and Oceans. India has accepted the verdict of the International Court of Arbitration (ICA) regarding the India-Bangladesh maritime dispute.<sup>71</sup> By referring to this verdict, India wants China to accept the verdict and, at the same time, calls all parties to respect UNCLOS. The verdict of UNCLOS provides legal validity for India's presence in energy exploration across the South China Sea with the cooperation of Vietnam.

Act East Policy helped India improve close cooperation with Vietnam and other concerned regional and multilateral organizations like BIMSTEC, EAS, ASEAN, MCG, IORA, and ACD. Through the "Act East Policy," India has been developing cross-border infrastructure to access the South China Sea via land routes.<sup>72</sup> Both 'Look East' and 'Act East' policies have had political, military, and economic components. However, the focus on energy cooperation and exploration has increased in the past decade.

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<sup>70</sup> "India, Vietnam Signs 12 Agreements," *The Hindu*. September 3, (2016). <https://www.thehindu.com/news/Modi-in-Vietnam-India-Vietnam-sign-bilateral-agreements/article60525785.ece>

<sup>71</sup> Rajendra M. Abhyankar. *Indian diplomacy: beyond strategic autonomy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, (2018).

<sup>72</sup> L.H.M. Ling, Adriana Erthal Abdenur, Payal Banerjee, Nimmi Kurian, Mahendra P. Lama, and Li Bo. *India China: Rethinking borders and security*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, (2021).

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With increasing Indian engagement with the Southeast Asian nations, India faces severe problems from China. Twenty Indian soldiers were killed, and an unknown number of Chinese soldiers were injured in a brawl between Indian and Chinese troops on June 15, 2020. The conflict is a component of an ongoing border standoff between the two forces on the Line of Actual Control along the Galwan River. Most members of the Indian strategic community concur that the relationship between China and India is irreversibly deteriorating as a result of this border conflict. They contend that the foundation of ties that developed following the 1988 visit of former Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi to Beijing has been upended, if not destroyed.<sup>73</sup> China and India began to doubt one other's motives and actions after the Galwan battle. Both parties tend to attribute benign reasons to their conduct while attributing malicious motives to those of the other. It seems to have given the Chinese the sense that India's goodwill towards China is not being returned and the Indians the impression that China is not attentive enough—even unconcerned—about India's fundamental issues. Deep-seated mistrust is also suggested by each side's propensity to reject the other's justifications. In August 2023, Indian Prime Minister Mr. Modi and Chinese Premier Mr. Xi met in Johannesburg on the sidelines of the BRICS summit. They agreed to disengage the problem at India's border with China. In September 2023, the Indian Foreign Minister claimed that about 75

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<sup>73</sup> Vijay Ghokhale. "The road from Galwan: The future of India-China relations," *Carnegie India*, 10, (2021).

percent of the “disengagement” problems at India’s border with China had been resolved. However, a definitive resolution of the China-India border dispute remains elusive.<sup>74</sup>

India and Vietnam hold significant potential for expanding energy cooperation, particularly given their shared interests in energy security, the global energy transition, and economic growth. Both countries want to diversify their energy sources, promote renewable energy, and develop sustainable infrastructure. As India’s energy demand rises and Vietnam focuses on meeting its growing industrial and domestic energy needs, energy cooperation has become a strategic area of focus in their bilateral relationship. Fields such as rare earth minerals, nuclear energy, civil nuclear, LNG supply, solar energy, and hydropower energy offer a vast space for cooperation between nations. India and Vietnam are in a good position to expand their solar energy cooperation, which is consistent with their shared goals of energy security and sustainable development. The two nations can strengthen their bilateral ties and play a key role in propelling the global solar energy transition by utilizing their manufacturing, technology, and policy innovation strengths. This partnership further strengthens their dedication to combating climate change and promoting a sustainable energy future in the Indo-Pacific.

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<sup>74</sup> Federica Marci. “How India and China Pulled back from a border war- and why no,” *Aljazeera*, October 22, (2024).  
<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/10/22/how-india-and-china-pulled-back-from-a-border-war-and-why>.

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The present collaboration between Vietnam and India is aggressive, forward-thinking, and backed by innovative policy measures. One crucial motivator is still economic cooperation. In 2023–2024, India and Vietnam's bilateral trade totaled USD 14.82 billion. China is Vietnam's biggest trading partner, and their combined trade in 2023 will be worth USD 171.9 billion, far exceeding this amount. If tensions between Beijing and Hanoi are resolved shortly, Vietnam's pursuit of deepening strategic ties with other partners, including India, might be deprioritized. Growing trade ties with India could be crucial in this situation. While trade is essential for a stable partnership, cultivating like-minded alliances in the Indo-Pacific is increasingly relevant to India's rising influence in the region amid the China challenge.<sup>75</sup>

## VII. Conclusion

The recent positive developments in the energy cooperation between India and Vietnam have enlarged the momentum of several mutual collaborations and engagements. Moreover, India is involved in joint exploration activities, but it is still insufficient to fulfill India's geopolitical and geostrategic interests. So far, the three blocks have been allocated to ONGC Videsh Limited (OVL), which is inadequate for the security of supply of both concerned

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<sup>75</sup> Rishi Gupta and Shruti Dey. "India and Vietnam: Forging a Forward-Looking Strategic Partnership," *Institute for Security and Development Policy* 53, September 10, (2024).  
<https://www.isdp.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/Blog-53-Vietnam-new.pdf>.

countries. The region is very significant for Indian interests, and it should stand by to protect its interests. If India still hesitates to participate in the South China Sea with total capacity for activities like hydrocarbon exploration and naval exercise, then it would be a big mistake both at diplomatic and policy-making levels. Although trade between India and Vietnam has witnessed improvement these years, it is still not satisfactory, seeing the importance of Vietnam for India. Hence, India should engage itself more proactively to strengthen trade activities with Vietnam and other ASEAN countries. The Chinese maritime forces in the Indian Ocean are surrounding India. The South China Sea is where India could challenge Chinese maritime expansion behavior. In response to such Chinese activity, India's involvement in South China Sea water could compel China to consider its Indian Ocean policies. Vietnam has become a reliable partner in the South China Sea region, which may help India balance power against China. However, India requires a serious geopolitical and geostrategic commitment in the South China Sea region.

India's efforts to make Vietnam a close partner have advanced India-Vietnam cooperation successfully in many fields. However, it would be sensible for India to prioritize energy cooperation, while collaboration in other fields like defense, finance, and shipbuilding should also be given due importance. By considering the need for energy resources, this paper suggests

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that India should take steps seriously to enlarge engagements with other members of ASEAN. It may strengthen India's strategic presence in the region and help India increase its power balance against China. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's continuous visit to several ASEAN countries gave a sense that the Modi government is committed to implementing the objectives of the Act East Policy. Despite several geopolitical challenges to India, it is still strengthening its ties with ASEAN countries, although the pace is slow.

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