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### COMMENTARY

INDIA-VIETNAM NAVAL EXERCISES: PORTRAYING A VITAL PARTNERSHIP  
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India is according strategic priority to its partnership with Vietnam, this was once again highlighted when the two countries conducted their naval exercises in the South China Sea last week. Since 2018, both countries have been conducting naval exercises every year to signify their relationship that was upgraded to a “comprehensive strategic partnership” in 2016. Among the commitments, naval cooperation is most comprehensive as India has pledged to train Vietnamese soldiers in submarine, aviation, and dockyard training. As part of their growing naval partnership, the Indian Navy has also been making port calls to Vietnam in recent years. These naval engagements of India in the region come under the initiative of Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s “Security and Growth for All in the Region” (SAGAR) initiative.

The naval exercises that took place successfully, included the “harbour phase”, where personnel from both the navies interacted under COVID-19 protocols. In the sea exercises, both navies trained for surface warfare exercises, weapons firing drills, and helicopter operations. The involvement of guided-missile destroyer INS Ranvijay and Corvette INS Kora with Vietnamese Frigate 012 Ly Thai To in the exercises is part of the larger goal to improve interoperability and adaptability between the two navies. The exercises were conducted in the waters off central Khanh Hoa province, and an Indian contingent of 459 officers participated in it.

India’s participation coincides with its increasing naval attention to the Indo-Pacific region and the realisation of its ‘Act East’ Policy. In fact, at present, India has deployed four of its frontline warships on a two-month voyage to Southeast Asia (including South China Sea) and Western Pacific. Therefore, naval exercises with Vietnam are part of India’s itinerary of several bilateral and multilateral exercises planned in the region. The participating countries include the Philippines, Singapore, Indonesia, and Australia. In addition, India is also set to participate in MALABAR-21 with the Japanese Maritime Self Defence Force, Royal Australian Navy, and the United States Navy in the Western Pacific.

In this context, India’s strategic partnership with Vietnam aims to bolster the countries’ expanding ties by improving on areas where both share common concerns and interests. The naval exercises reiterate India’s commitment to meaningfully engage Vietnam in the region. For instance, India’s decision to invite Vietnam to its Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI) during the 17th India-Vietnam Joint Commission

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Meeting in August 2020 portrays India’s willingness to enhance trust in the partnership. This would require both traditional and non-traditional security cooperation between the two

countries. For example, on 26 December 2020, India delivered relief materials to flood-hit Central Vietnam. As part of its disaster relief measures, both countries also conducted passage exercises during that time. In India's case, the disaster relief was part of its Mission Sagar-III, where it engaged in Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) efforts. The HADR is also one of the seven pillars of IPOI.

Therefore, India-Vietnam naval exercises firmly situate India an important role in the peace and security of the Southeast Asian region. As such, in India's worldview, Vietnam holds a significant position in its expansion policy in the region. As a result, India's efforts are focused on improving conditions for aid and assistance to the region. For instance, in the case of Vietnam, India has simplified defence exports to the country in addition to the training of their fighter pilots and submariners, MiG fighter jets upgradation and service, avionics, and radar technology, and range of services in repairs, and maintenance. Most useful from the Vietnamese perspective is the ship-building project worth \$ 100 million dollars (part of \$600 dollars' worth of Defence Line of Credit) to build 12 high-speed guard boats for the Vietnam Border Guard Command. Larsen and Toubro in India and Hong Ha Shipyard Company in Vietnam will build five and seven boats respectively.

No doubt, the presence of India's four frontline warships in the region as part of its extended overseas deployment, and the warships of Germany, the UK, the US in South China Sea have not gone unnoticed by China. In response, China has launched its own naval exercises on August 7, 2021, around the contested waters of Paracel Islands that are claimed by Vietnam. The bilateral naval exercises marked its completion amid such power rivalries and political tensions. Under the circumstances, India and Vietnam seem to prioritize sustained high-level attention to their interactions.

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