India - Vietnam Relations on an Even Keel but Need a Push

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On the eve of forthcoming virtual summit between Prime Ministers Nguyen Xuan Phuc and Narendra Modi it would be useful to reflect on the current status of bilateral relationship and look for ways and means to impart further momentum to the same. Over the years both sides have assiduously worked towards having warm and friendly relations based not only on historical and cultural connections but also on shared security perceptions on regional and international issues. The Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Agreement signed in 2016 covers a wide variety of areas ranging from political engagement, economic cooperation, and expansion of trade, defence and security cooperation, energy cooperation as also people to people exchanges besides collaborations in a number of other areas. Further, Vietnam remains a sheet anchor of India's Act East Policy which was unveiled by PM Modi in November in 2014 and which replaced the earlier 'Look East Policy'.

Last meeting between both the Prime Ministers was held in November last year on the sidelines of ASEAN and East Asia Summits. Both leaders had discussions on how to strengthen bilateral relationship so as to realise the objectives and goals of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Agreement. Though the current year saw an early onset of Covid-19 pandemic the high

level political exchanges continued without a pause. February 2020 saw the visit of Vietnam's Vice President Ms. Dang Thi Ngoc Thinh to India. Besides the joint delegation level talks there was also the inauguration for the launching of direct flights between India and Vietnam. An agreement was also signed to open a resident office of Voice of Vietnam in New Delhi. Vietnamese Vice-President also paid a visit to Bodh Gaya.

Later maintaining the momentum, in April Prime Minister Modi and Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc exchanged views on COVID-19 situation on telephone including ways for bilateral cooperation in fighting the pandemic as also discussed the evolving bilateral relationship. Further, the 17th Joint Commission on Trade, Economic, Scientific and Technological Cooperation Meeting was held in a virtual mode on 25 August 2020 wherein Foreign Ministers of both the countries took stock of multifarious aspects of our bilateral relationship including those of trade, tourism and technology. During the meeting among other projects and initiatives, seven Quick Impact Projects' for water resource management in Mekong Delta Region and five projects for development of educational infrastructure in Vietnam by India were agreed to which was reflective of the ascending trajectory of bilateral relationship.

Defence and security cooperation between both sides has been an abiding feature of the evolving strategic relationship which has been bolstered by a strategic convergence on the contextual issues. Last month General Ngo Xuan Lich, Minister of National Defence of Vietnam and India's Raksha Mantri Shri Rajnath Singh held a virtual meeting and affirmed that defence cooperation was most significant element of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership arrived at between the two sides. A number of projects were discussed including collaboration in capability building in defence industry, training as well as cooperation in UN Peacekeeping operations. Additionally, an Implementing Arrangement for cooperation in the field of Hydrography was signed to enable sharing of Hydrographic data and assist

in production of navigational charts. This becomes very relevant because of the complex situation in the South China Sea and in Indian Ocean region.

Further, India's Defence Minister also dwelled upon PM Modi's conceptual framework of "Atma Nirbhar Bharat" which among other aspects lays emphasis for increasing self-reliance in defence industries. Thus India's indigenous efforts in development of industry would also be able to contribute positively to building similar capabilities in Vietnam. He also looked forward to concluding a framework agreement for such collaboration in the defence industry in the near future. Meanwhile, General Ngo Xuan Lich recognised the work done by India in the capacity building of Vietnamese Defence Forces especially in the area of Human Resource development. It was also brought out that India was keen to enlarge the scope of training for the Vietnamese armed forces in Indian armed forces' training establishments. Another facet of bilateral strengthening ties has been expanding of cooperation in maritime security domain. This aspect was emphasised during both Prime Ministers' meeting in November 2019.

It is also time to renew the "Joint Vision on Defence Cooperation for 2015-2020" that was signed in May 2015. Such a joint vision for next five years would be an affirmation of the close defence and security ties as also it would chart out the elements of bilateral cooperation in the near future. Moreover, it needs no emphasis that this vision would be an essential part of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between the two countries.

Looking back at trade and economic ties while it can be said that trade between India and Vietnam has expanded greatly from a low figure 200 million USD in the year 2000 to about 12 billion USD in 2019-20 yet the full potential has not been exploited. During a meeting between PM Modi and President of Vietnam in March 2018 at New Delhi it was decided to take "substantive and practical measures" to realise a bilateral trade target of 15 billion USD by 2020. It is also noteworthy that Vietnam's bilateral trade with both the US and China is much higher. On the other hand Covid-19 that has had adverse impact on global economy could also be contributory factor

towards underachieving of the trade turnover. During the Joint Commission meeting in August this year it was well recognised that both sides need to work together to realise the full potential of trade and investment in consonance with their levels of economic development. Also Covid-19 crisis could be used as an opportunity to rework global value chains that are more reliable and which serve mutual interests in trade and commerce.

India and Vietnam have also been cooperating and coordinating their approaches in multilateral forums like the ASEAN and the UN. India is also appreciative of the fact that Vietnam as a Chair of ASEAN this year has not only handled the Covid-19 crisis quite well internally but also has been instrumental in evolving a cohesive and coordinated response at the multilateral level by the ASEAN. India has also been supporting Vietnam and ASEAN efforts to promote an open, inclusive, rule based and transparent regional architecture with the ASEAN at the centre. ASEAN under the chairmanship has also asserted that the UNCLOS was the sole legal basis to resolve maritime and territorial disputes in the region; a position which is also endorsed by India. New Delhi also supports the ASEAN's Outlook on Indo-Pacific which has similar objectives as that of India's Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI). There are a number of areas in both these initiatives where both countries can work together to achieve common goals of peace, security and growth.

With both India and Vietnam becoming non-permanent members of the UN Security Council in 2021 for a period of two years there would be an opportunity to coordinate their approaches to the regional and global matters as both share similar outlook on geostrategic issues.

Thus the coming bilateral virtual meeting between both the Prime Ministers holds the prospects of giving a substantial push to the existing partnership agreements and understandings with a view to further cement the evolving relationship in more meaningful way.