

Converging Strategic Interests, Diverging Constraints: An analysis of India-Vietnam Defence Cooperation

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Abstract:

India–Vietnam defence cooperation has gained renewed attention amid evolving security dynamics in the Indo-Pacific. Both countries increasingly perceive each other as reliable strategic partners, bound by shared concerns over maritime security, regional stability, and the preservation of a rules-based order. This paper examines the apparent paradox underlying this relationship. While strategic interests between India and Vietnam are increasingly convergent, defence cooperation continues to develop in a measured and restrained manner. Drawing on official statements, policy documents, and existing scholarly work, the study traces the evolution of bilateral defence engagement and identifies key areas of alignment, particularly in naval cooperation, capacity building, and strategic dialogue. At the same time, it highlights the political, structural, and regional constraints that limit the depth of cooperation, including Vietnam’s emphasis on strategic autonomy, India’s cautious defence outreach, and sensitivities within the wider Southeast Asian security environment. The paper argues that India–Vietnam defence cooperation is best understood not as a precursor to alliance formation, but as a pragmatic and calibrated partnership shaped equally by opportunity and restraint. By situating this bilateral relationship within broader debates on middle-power strategy and regional security, the study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of defence cooperation in contemporary Asia.

Keywords: India–Vietnam relations, defence cooperation, Indo-Pacific security, strategic partnership, maritime security, middle powers.

1. Introduction:

India–Vietnam relations have acquired renewed strategic significance in the evolving security landscape of the Indo-Pacific. Over the past decade, defence cooperation has emerged as a key pillar of bilateral engagement, often portrayed as evidence of growing strategic convergence between the two countries. Shared concerns over

maritime security, regional stability, and the maintenance of a rules-based order have encouraged closer interaction, particularly in the naval and security domains. However, despite regular high-level exchanges, defence agreements, and expanding institutional dialogue, the scope of cooperation remains carefully calibrated rather

than transformative. This apparent contradiction forms the central concern of this paper.

Existing analyses frequently explain India–Vietnam defence cooperation through the prism of China’s growing influence in the region (Pant, 2019; Thayer, 2018). While external strategic pressures undoubtedly shape bilateral engagement, such accounts tend to overstate alignment and underplay the constraints that structure the relationship. Vietnam’s long-standing commitment to strategic autonomy, reflected in its defence policy principles, and India’s own cautious approach to defence diplomacy limit the extent to which cooperation can deepen (Mishra, 2020). As a result, defence ties have evolved incrementally, emphasising capacity building, training, and maritime cooperation rather than alliance-like commitments.

This paper argues that India–Vietnam defence cooperation is best understood as a pragmatic partnership shaped equally by converging interests and diverging constraints. Strategic convergence provides the political rationale for cooperation, but restraint is not a sign of weakness or hesitation; rather, it reflects deliberate choices informed by regional sensitivities, domestic priorities, and broader foreign policy traditions. By examining both enabling factors and limiting conditions, the paper seeks to move beyond linear narratives of strategic alignment. Further, the study situates India–Vietnam defence cooperation within broader debates on middle-power strategies and non-aligned security partnerships in Asia (Goh, 2016). It adopts a qualitative approach, drawing on official statements, policy documents, and existing scholarship to trace the evolution of defence engagement and assess its underlying logic. In doing so, the paper contributes to social science and humanities scholarship by highlighting how strategic partnerships can deepen without formal alliances and how constraint itself can serve as a stabilising element in regional security relations. Understanding this calibrated form of cooperation is essential not only for assessing the future trajectory of India–

Vietnam relations but also for appreciating the broader dynamics of security cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, where convergence often coexists with caution.

This study adopts a qualitative and interpretive research approach suited to examining strategic relationships in international politics. The analysis is based on a close reading of official policy documents, joint statements, defence agreements, and speeches issued by Indian and Vietnamese authorities. These primary sources are complemented by peer-reviewed academic literature and policy analyses from recognised research institutions. Rather than measuring outcomes quantitatively, the study focuses on identifying patterns, narratives, and constraints shaping defence cooperation over time. This approach allows for a contextual understanding of how strategic convergence and restraint coexist within the India–Vietnam defence partnership.

2. Strategic Foundations of India–Vietnam Relations:

The roots of India–Vietnam relations are deeply embedded in historical solidarity, anti-colonial struggles, and a shared commitment to sovereign equality, laying the groundwork for contemporary strategic engagement. India was among the first countries to recognise a unified Vietnam after its independence. It played a noteworthy role in the International Commission for Supervision and Control established following the Geneva Accord of 1954, symbolising early diplomatic trust between the two nations (Consulate General of India Ho Chi Minh City, 2025). This historical foundation fostered mutual respect that later matured into structured cooperation as both countries navigated post-Cold War regional dynamics.

Formal strategic cooperation began to take shape in the late twentieth century. It was institutionalised with the signing of a Strategic Partnership in 2007, which was later upgraded to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in 2016 during Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s visit to Hanoi (Asian Confluence, 2025; Consulate

General of India Ho Chi Minh City, 2025). This elevation reflected not only deepening bilateral ties but also a shared desire to cooperate on regional security issues. Defence cooperation became a central pillar of this partnership framework, beginning with a Memorandum of Understanding on Defence Cooperation in 2009 and evolving into broader engagements, such as the Joint Vision on Defence Cooperation in 2015 and the Joint Vision Statement on India-Vietnam Defence Partnership towards 2030 signed in 2022 (Consulate General of India Ho Chi Minh City, 2025; Asian Confluence, 2025). These institutional mechanisms have enabled sustained dialogue and incremental growth in defence ties.

The strategic foundation of the relationship is also shaped by converging regional interests, particularly concerns over maritime security, freedom of navigation, and stable regional order in the Indo-Pacific. India's Act East Policy frames Vietnam as a pivotal partner in its extended neighbourhood strategy, reflecting an interest in Southeast Asian engagement beyond economic cooperation. At the same time, Vietnam views India as a major partner that helps balance power asymmetries in its region (ORF Asia, 2025). Shared strategic outlooks on non-traditional security challenges, such as counter-terrorism and cyber security, further reinforce these foundations (Asian Confluence, 2025).

However, this strategic foundation is not solely reactive to external pressures; it also arises from deliberate policy choices grounded in the mutual recognition of long-term geopolitical trends. India and Vietnam both seek to navigate a complex regional environment marked by great-power competition, and their partnership reflects a calculated effort to hedge risks while enhancing their respective strategic autonomy.

3. Evolution of Defence Cooperation:

Defence cooperation between India and Vietnam has evolved steadily over the past three decades, shaped by historical ties, regional dynamics, and shifting strategic priorities. While diplomatic relations were established in 1972, formal defence

engagement remained limited throughout the Cold War and much of the post-Cold War period. It was only in the 1990s—when India's Look East Policy intensified, and Southeast Asia gained prominence in New Delhi's strategic outlook—that defence cooperation began to take on a more precise institutional form. The signing of early agreements in the mid-1990s marked the first deliberate efforts to build military-to-military ties, focusing primarily on military training, exchanges, and knowledge sharing (ORCASIA, 2025).

Progress in the early years was cautious but consistent. Exchanges of defence delegations and the participation of Vietnamese officers in Indian training institutions helped lay interpersonal and institutional foundations for deeper engagement. These interactions were important in fostering mutual trust, particularly in fields such as joint exercises and staff training, which became regular features of bilateral engagement. Vietnam's own defence reforms and expanding regional role provided further impetus for cooperation, as Hanoi sought partners that could enhance its defence capacity without compromising its strategic autonomy (Thayer, 2018).

The elevation of the bilateral relationship from a Strategic Partnership in 2007 to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in 2016 signified formal recognition of defence cooperation as central to the India-Vietnam relationship. These institutional upgrades were more than symbolic; they reflected shared perceptions of the changing strategic landscape in Asia and a mutual willingness to invest in practical cooperation. Official joint statements began to refer explicitly to maritime security, capacity building, and defence industry cooperation, even as the substance of these commitments remained modest in scope.

One of the most visible manifestations of this evolution has been India's provision of training and capacity-building support to Vietnamese forces. Training programs for Vietnamese military personnel in Indian academies became regularised, and Indian defence experts were

invited to Hanoi to conduct courses on subjects ranging from logistics to counter-terrorism. These programs helped strengthen professional ties and created constituencies within the defence establishments of both countries that saw value in deeper engagement (Mishra, 2020).

Naval cooperation, in particular, emerged as a key area of focus, reflecting mutual concerns over maritime security and freedom of navigation in regional waters. Port calls by Indian warships and joint exercises with the Vietnamese navy became regular, signalling both political commitment and practical cooperation. Although these activities did not amount to alliance-level commitments, they demonstrated a willingness to operationalise shared interests in tangible ways. Despite these advances, the evolution of defence cooperation has been shaped as much by restraint as by ambition. Both India and Vietnam have maintained cautious approaches that reflect their respective foreign policy traditions and regional calculations. Vietnam's emphasis on strategic autonomy and India's careful balancing of its global partnerships have ensured that defence cooperation expands incrementally, informed by opportunity, necessity, and mutual respect.

4. Areas of Converging Strategic Interests:

The convergence of strategic interests between India and Vietnam has unfolded gradually since the formalisation of their Strategic Partnership in 2007, shaped by parallel assessments of regional change rather than short-term tactical alignment. At the heart of this convergence is a shared concern for maritime security. Both countries are maritime states whose economic growth and strategic autonomy depend heavily on open and secure sea lanes, as maritime competition intensified in the Indo-Pacific, India and Vietnam increasingly emphasised freedom of navigation, peaceful dispute resolution, and respect for international law as core principles guiding their defence engagement (Singh, 2011). This convergence has translated into sustained naval interaction, including ship visits, training exchanges, and cooperation in maritime domain awareness.

A second area of alignment lies in their overlapping perceptions of regional order. Vietnam's security outlook has long been shaped by the need to manage asymmetries with larger powers, while India's regional strategy since the late 2000s has sought to balance engagement and deterrence without entering formal alliances. This has produced a shared preference for multilateralism and inclusive regional frameworks. Joint statements issued after the elevation of bilateral ties in 2016 repeatedly underline support for ASEAN centrality and regional mechanisms such as the East Asia Summit, reflecting a convergence in diplomatic strategy as much as in defence outlook (Government of India, 2016; Vuving, 2020).

Defence capacity building represents another important area of strategic convergence. Vietnam's efforts to modernise its armed forces have been constrained by the need to avoid overdependence on any single external partner. India's role as a provider of training, technical expertise, and limited defence equipment has therefore been attractive precisely because it aligns with Vietnam's emphasis on strategic autonomy (Thayer, 2017). Indian training institutions have hosted Vietnamese officers across all service branches, while technical cooperation has focused on maintenance, logistics, and skills development rather than on high-profile force deployments. This approach reflects a shared understanding that long-term institutional strengthening is preferable to rapid operational integration.

Non-traditional security challenges have also emerged as a significant area of convergence since the 2010s. Both countries face threats from terrorism, cyber insecurity, natural disasters, and transnational crime. Cooperation in these domains has expanded through defence dialogues and joint initiatives on humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, areas that carry lower political risk but high strategic value (Brewster, 2018). Such engagement broadens the scope of defence cooperation beyond conventional military

concerns and aligns with regional norms emphasising comprehensive security.

Finally, convergence is evident in the broader strategic posture of India and Vietnam as middle powers navigating an increasingly polarised international environment. Both seek to diversify partnerships, avoid entangling alliances, and preserve room for strategic manoeuvre. Defence cooperation between them thus functions as a means of signalling intent and enhancing resilience rather than forming a collective security arrangement (Kuo, 2023). This shared strategic logic explains why cooperation has deepened steadily while remaining carefully bounded. Taken together, these areas of convergence demonstrate that India–Vietnam defence cooperation rests on a durable foundation of shared interests that have developed over nearly two decades. The partnership reflects not only common security concerns but also a mutual preference for calibrated engagement shaped by regional realities and long-term strategic calculation.

5. Constraints Shaping Defence Engagement:

Despite notable progress in defence cooperation, several enduring constraints continue to shape the depth and scope of India–Vietnam engagement. These constraints arise from differences in threat perceptions, institutional limitations, political considerations, and broader regional dynamics. Understanding these limiting factors is essential to appreciating why defence cooperation, while steadily expanding, remains cautious and calibrated rather than transformative.

One of the most significant constraints stems from Vietnam’s strategic autonomy doctrine. Hanoi has historically pursued a foreign policy aimed at balancing relations with multiple great powers without becoming overly dependent on any single partner. This approach reflects Vietnam’s experience of great-power rivalry and the desire to avoid entanglement in alliances that could compromise its decision-making flexibility (Hiep, 2019). Although Vietnam values cooperation with India, it remains mindful of preserving its

autonomy vis-à-vis both regional and global powers, thereby tempering the depth of defence integration.

India’s own institutional and policy limitations also play a constraining role. India’s strategic focus has traditionally prioritised its immediate neighbourhood, and it has only gradually broadened outwards under policies such as the Act East and Indo-Pacific strategies. As a result, bureaucratic inertia, inter-service coordination challenges, and resource constraints can slow the pace of defence cooperation initiatives. India’s defence exports and technology transfers, for instance, remain modest relative to its capabilities due to regulatory and industrial bottlenecks (Pant & Joshi, 2021). These internal constraints limit India’s ability to offer substantial defence hardware or rapid capability enhancements to Vietnam.

Regional diplomatic sensitivities further shape defence engagement. Southeast Asian states, including Vietnam, place a high value on ASEAN centrality and are wary of actions that might be perceived as aligning too closely with one external power against another. Vietnam’s defence cooperation with India must therefore be calibrated to avoid provoking regional apprehensions or undermining ASEAN cohesion (Chia & Narayan, 2022). This balancing act curtails the visibility and depth of defence activities, especially those that might be perceived as explicitly countering another significant power.

Shared threat perceptions, while overlapping in some respects, are not uniform. India’s security concerns span a broad geographical spectrum from its western and northern borders to the maritime domain. In contrast, Vietnam’s primary security focus has been on the South China Sea and its immediate vicinity. These differences in prioritisation mean that defence cooperation tends to align around broad principles rather than detailed operational integration. Cooperation in areas such as cybersecurity, logistics support, and joint industrial collaboration, therefore, progresses selectively, depending on the alignment of priorities at a given time (Roy, 2023).

Finally, external geopolitical pressures also act as a constraint. Both India and Vietnam navigate relationships with major powers such as the United States, China, and Russia. This complex web of external influences necessitates caution, as overtly deepening defence ties could invite diplomatic pushback or strategic discomfort from other partners (Hameiri & Jones, 2020). Such geopolitical sensitivities often result in incremental cooperation rather than rapid acceleration.

In sum, constraints shaping India–Vietnam defence engagement are not obstacles to partnership per se but reflect deliberate strategic choices informed by historical experience, institutional capacities, and delicate regional balancing. Recognising these constraints is crucial to understanding the deliberate pace and character of defence cooperation between the two countries.

6. Managing Convergence and Constraints:

In the ongoing defence partnership between India and Vietnam, strategic convergence and structural constraints coexist in a dynamic interplay. Both states have worked consciously to balance shared interests—such as maritime security and institutional cooperation—with political sensitivities and broader regional pressures that limit deeper integration. Effective management of these competing forces has shaped the distinctive, calibrated character of their defence engagement.

A primary mechanism for managing this balance has been institutionalised dialogue and policy coordination. Regular Defence Policy Dialogues and service-level interactions provide platforms where both sides openly assess shared objectives and potential limitations, enabling incremental progress without overcommitment (Asian Confluence, 2025). These dialogues allow policymakers to anticipate friction points, align schedules for joint training and exercises, and agree on new cooperative areas in a manner that respects each country’s autonomy.

Flexible cooperation frameworks have also played a key role. Rather than formal treaty obligations typical of alliance structures, India and Vietnam

rely on Memoranda of Understanding and Letters of Intent to guide collaborative efforts. For example, recent agreements on mutual submarine search and rescue and defence industry cooperation outline intentions and areas of cooperation without legally binding commitments, preserving policy levers for future adjustments (Govt. of India, 2025). Such mechanisms help both sides advance cooperation even when strategic conditions are uncertain or when political pressures from other partners—and especially China—could discourage more formal alliances.

Capacity-building and training initiatives represent another avenue for managing convergence within constraints. By focusing on professional development—such as staff exchanges, technical expertise sharing, and logistics support—both sides strengthen institutional ties without imposing obligations that might be perceived as compromising autonomy (Le Hoang Kiet, 2023). These activities build trust while avoiding the political sensitivities of major defence procurements or alliance-like operational commitments.

Engagement in non-traditional security domains—including cybersecurity, disaster relief, and peacekeeping—provides lower-risk avenues for cooperation that align with both nations’ strategic priorities and regional norms (Joint Vision Statement, 2020). By expanding cooperation into these areas, India and Vietnam accommodate broader security needs and regional expectations without provoking heightened geopolitical tensions.

Furthermore, multilateral diplomacy and regionally framed cooperation help manage constraints by situating bilateral defence ties within broader ASEAN and Indo-Pacific architectures. This reduces perceptions that the partnership is exclusively directed against any single power, while affirming commitment to norms such as freedom of navigation and peaceful dispute resolution.

Lastly, strategic communication plays a subtle but significant role. Official statements and joint

communiqués consistently emphasise shared principles like respect for sovereignty, adherence to international law, and support for a stable, inclusive Indo-Pacific. This framing helps mitigate external apprehensions and reinforces the narrative that India–Vietnam defence cooperation is complementary to, rather than competitive with, existing regional security structures (Joint Vision Statement, 2020).

In sum, managing convergence and constraints in India–Vietnam defence relations reflects careful diplomatic judgment, institutional adaptation, and a commitment to gradual, resilient cooperation. These practices allow both countries to deepen engagement while protecting strategic autonomy and navigating complex regional pressures.

7. Regional and Policy Implications:

The deepening defence cooperation between India and Vietnam carries significant regional and policy implications that reflect evolving security concerns, diplomatic strategy, and broader Indo-Pacific dynamics. Rather than existing as an isolated bilateral endeavour, this partnership now intersects with maritime security architectures, multilateral institutional engagements, and India’s national strategic policies, particularly its Act East and Indo-Pacific visions.

A central implication lies in the partnership’s contribution to maritime security and stability. Both India and Vietnam have made securing key sea lines of communication a priority, given their reliance on marine trade routes and the strategic importance of the South China Sea and surrounding waters to global commerce (*Asian Confluence*, 2025). Joint naval exercises, logistics support agreements, and cooperation in search-and-rescue operations augment practical capabilities that can bolster a rules-based order in regional waters. Enhanced interoperability and coordinated responses to maritime emergencies contribute not only to bilateral security but also to broader regional efforts to deter illegal activities and strengthen peace in contested maritime zones (*IMPRI*, 2025).

In policy terms, strengthening defence ties reinforces ASEAN-centred regionalism. Vietnam’s advocacy for closer coordination with India in forums such as the ASEAN Defence Ministers’ Meeting Plus (ADMM+) underscores how bilateral cooperation can be synergised with multilateral mechanisms to enhance collective security without undermining ASEAN centrality (*Eurasia Review*, 2025). This aligns with India’s own emphasis on collaborative, normative security engagements that respect the sovereignty of all states and reaffirm ASEAN’s role as a convener of dialogue across the Indo-Pacific.

The India–Vietnam defence partnership also has implications for India’s strategic posture in Southeast Asia. As part of its Act East Policy, India has increasingly viewed Vietnam as a linchpin in its Southeast Asian engagement, not just for defence cooperation but also for broader geopolitical signalling (*Economic Times*, 2023). Enhanced collaboration with Vietnam underscores India’s willingness to support like-minded partners in maintaining regional stability, particularly amid pressures such as assertive territorial claims in the South China Sea. At the ASEAN-India Summit in 2025, India’s emphasis on maritime cooperation—declaring 2026 as the “Year of ASEAN-India Maritime Cooperation”—demonstrated its continued commitment to integrating its bilateral partnerships into broader regional frameworks (*Economic Times*, 2025).

Beyond military and diplomatic dimensions, this cooperation has strategic signalling effects: it signals to regional actors that India and Vietnam are committed to upholding international law and peaceful dispute resolution, which can help reassure smaller states concerned about the behaviour of larger powers. This strengthens the normative foundations of regional security, reinforcing commitments to principles such as freedom of navigation and adherence to international legal norms outlined in UNCLOS (*Asian Confluence*, 2025).

Finally, as India and Vietnam expand into emerging domains—such as defence industrial collaboration, capacity building, and shared

technology initiatives—there is potential for longer-term regional integration that stretches beyond immediate security imperatives. Such cooperation can foster economic linkages, enhance training and logistics frameworks, and encourage joint engagement in multilateral exercises and forums. By doing so, the defence partnership becomes a substantive pillar of regional order, supporting stability, mutual trust, and sustainable cooperation in a complex Indo-Pacific environment.

8. Conclusion:

The trajectory of India–Vietnam defence cooperation reflects a careful balancing act between shared strategic objectives and enduring structural constraints. As this study has shown, the partnership is anchored in a convergence of interests rooted in maritime security, respect for international law, and concerns about stability in the Indo-Pacific. Over time, defence engagement has moved beyond symbolic gestures to include regular dialogues, naval cooperation, capacity-building initiatives, and emerging defence industrial linkages. These developments demonstrate a growing strategic comfort and mutual trust between the two countries.

At the same time, the analysis underscores that cooperation has evolved within precise limits. Resource constraints, domestic priorities, sensitivity to regional power dynamics, and Vietnam’s cautious foreign policy approach have shaped the pace and scope of engagement. India, too, has calibrated its defence outreach to avoid overextension while aligning its initiatives with broader regional strategies such as the Act East Policy and its Indo-Pacific vision. The result is a partnership that is neither alliance-like nor purely transactional, but pragmatic and incremental.

By managing convergence without overstating strategic intent, India and Vietnam have crafted a defence relationship that contributes to regional stability while preserving strategic autonomy. This nuanced approach highlights how middle powers can expand security cooperation in contested regions without escalating tensions, offering a

valuable model for cooperative security in the Indo-Pacific.

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