



Looking beyond the optics

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Looking beyond the optics-Vietnam is crucial to India's Look East Policy — bilateral ties must build on common concerns

- President Ram Nath Kovind's choice of Vietnam as the first Southeast Asian country to visit in his capacity as the President is not surprising.
- A close 'ally' of India for over 70 years, and not limited to official diplomatic ties, Vietnam is critical for India's foreign policy at the regional and systemic levels.
- While Mr. Kovind's visit highlights the 'normal' trajectory of a presidential visit, there is a need to understand how Vietnam has calibrated its domestic and foreign policy shifts and where India's relevance can fit into these policy changes.
- Domestically, since the start of its Doi Moi policy — its political and economic renewal campaign — in 1986, Vietnam has made dramatic strides.
- Today it is a rapidly growing, regional economic giant, showing both dynamism and pragmatism in its calculations.

Common ground of health

- An area of potential convergence for both Vietnam and India is health care.
- With Indonesia ratifying the India-ASEAN Services agreement on November 13, New Delhi is a step closer to signing the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, bringing India to the forefront of the services sector globally.
- A potential area of convergence in the realm of health care through joint public-private partnership agreements can be explored by the two countries.
- Internationally, Vietnam's foreign policy is characterised by 'multidirectionalism', which addresses regional asymmetries of the power balance by engaging across a broad spectrum of states to achieve its interests.

Security concerns

- Today there is increasing commonality of security concerns between Vietnam and its ASEAN partners — as well as with Australia, India, Japan and the U.S., particularly in the areas of maritime security and adherence to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea.
- Finding compatibility between the 'Indo-Asia-Pacific' and the U.S. driven 'Indo-Pacific' necessitates a more nuanced approach whereby regional concerns of ASEAN centrality can be assuaged while accounting for diverse approaches to maintaining regional stability.
- In pursuance of this, the two countries have planned a bilateral level maritime security dialogue in early 2019.

Focus on sub-regionalism

- As ASEAN continues to focus on its centrality in the region, there will undoubtedly be shifts in how smaller members of ASEAN perceive the centrifugal forces of China's rise.
- Vietnam has helped to mitigate these by focussing on both sub-regionalism and regionalism as the core of its priorities.
- India too looks at both sub-regionalism and regionalism as priority avenues to pursue its foreign policy.
- The India-Vietnam Joint Statement of March 2018 reiterates the focus given to sub-regionalism and the Mekong Ganga Cooperation framework.
- The major takeaway from Mr. Kovind's visit is the reference to the 'cooperation model' India offers, providing choices and opportunities for its friends highlighting India's willingness to address issues on which increasing synergies need to evolve.
- While the ties have progressed under the Look East and Act East Policies, going forward they need to factor in pragmatism, helping relations to move forward.