

India strengthens strategic ties with Vietnam

By John Roberts
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Indian President Pranab Mukherjee concluded a four-day state visit to Vietnam on September 17 that set the stage for closer economic and military relations between the two countries directed against China in particular. The trip came on the eve of a state visit by Chinese President Xi Jinping to India on September 18.

Seven agreements were signed during the trip, including a Letter of Intent between the Indian ONGC Videsh Limited and the Vietnam Oil and Gas Group for oil exploration in two extra blocks off the Vietnamese coast. Previous joint Indian-Vietnamese activities in contested waters in the South China Sea have led to sharp tensions with China.

Mukherjee issued a joint statement with Vietnamese President Truong Tan Sang on the need for security and safety in the South China Sea that was clearly aimed against China. It pointedly included the Vietnamese term for the waters—the East Sea. The statement also agreed that “freedom of navigation” should not be impeded and that all parties should “exercise restraint, avoid threat or use of force”—all key phrases that are in line with allegations by the US and its allies of Chinese “expansionism.”

Beijing reacted by repeating that disputes in the South China Sea must be settled through bilateral negotiations not involving third parties—in other words, India or the US.

Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Hong Lei warned: “We have noted [Mukherjee’s] visit to Vietnam ... China has indisputable sovereignty over Nansha islands and adjacent waters” and would oppose any oil exploration agreement if it included Chinese administered territory.

Mukherjee’s visit took place in the context of the Obama administration’s “pivot to Asia” aimed at undermining China diplomatically throughout the region and encircling it militarily in preparation for war. Washington has directly intervened in territorial

disputes in the South China Sea by insisting that it has a “national interest” in ensuring “freedom of navigation” through the waters, and encouraging South East Asian countries to more aggressively assert their claims.

Mukherjee’s trip set the stage for closer political and strategic ties with Vietnam. As well as the Vietnamese president, he met with Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung, Communist Party general secretary Nguyen Phu Trong and Ho Chi Minh City party chief Le Thanh Hai. Mukherjee extended an invitation to Prime Minister Dung to meet his Indian counterpart in October.

The new right-wing Indian government headed by Prime Minister Narendra Modi has taken a more assertive stance aimed at strengthening economic and strategic ties in East Asia, especially with Japan, and South East Asia. During her visit to Vietnam late last month, Indian Foreign Minister Sushma Swaraj declared that India wanted to turn its long-standing “Look East” policy into “Acting East” policy.

Significantly, the Indian press reported that negotiations for the sale of the sophisticated BrahMos cruise missile to Vietnam had reached “an advanced stage.” Vietnam has been pressing to acquire the cruise missile, which is being jointly developed by India and Russia, since 2011. During his visit, Mukherjee extended a \$100 million export credit to Hanoi that could cover the sale of the BrahMos missiles.

Hanoi wants the anti-ship version of the cruise missile, which has a range of 290 kilometres. Unlike other anti-ship missiles, it is supersonic, reaching 2.9 times the speed of sound in its terminal phase and making it hard to intercept. Its 200 kilogram warhead has devastating terminal effects.

Vietnam is seeking to boost its capacity to challenge China in the South China Sea. It is also purchasing six Kilo class submarines from Russia. A section of the Vietnamese leadership is pushing for an acceleration of

the country's pro-market program and to get "out of China's orbit" by forging closer economic, military and political ties with Washington and its allies.

Last month General Martin Dempsey, chairman of the US Joints Chiefs of Staff, suggested during a tour of Vietnam, that Washington might be ready to lift its decades-old arms ban on the sale of weapons to Hanoi. The *Wall Street Journal* called for the US to supply frigates and anti-ship weapons to challenge China's position.

These moves come in the wake of a confrontation between Vietnam and China over the placing of a Chinese oil rig in disputed waters from May 2 until July 16. Chinese and Vietnamese vessels clashed near the rig. Anti-Chinese riots in Vietnam left four Chinese citizens dead, 400 Chinese factories torched and forced the evacuation of 7,000 Chinese workers.

The dispute badly soured relations. In October last year, Chinese Premier Li Keqiang visited Hanoi and signed a new trade deal with Beijing as well as an agreement for joint exploration of natural resources in disputed areas of the Gulf of Tonkin.

Washington is clearly seeking to exploit this situation and encourage India to play a strategic role in South East Asia. US National Security Advisor Thomas Donilon remarked early last year: "US and Indian interests powerfully converge in the Asia-Pacific, where India has much to give and much to gain."

In August US Defence Secretary Chuck Hagel during a three-day visit to India offered to reinvigorate the 2012 Defence Technology and Trade Initiative to develop a US-Indian "global strategic partnership." Indian Prime Minister Modi, who issued a thinly veiled attack on Chinese "expansionism" during his visit to Tokyo this month, is clearly a willing partner in US strategic designs.

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