Military and Technical Cooperation with Vietnam Remains out of Reach for France

It is well known that China, the United States, Russia, Japan, Australia, South Korea and Singapore are considered to be the most active players in the Asia-Pacific (APAC) region. Other nations as, for instance, member-states of the European Union, are rarely mentioned in news items connected to APAC. Still, even they are changing the extent of their interest in this region. As a result, France has been working on strengthening its position in APAC by actively promoting cooperation with Vietnam, which is, at present, one of the leading nations in South East Asia (SEA).

The Strait of Malacca, located between the island of Sumatra and the Malay Peninsula, is in South East Asia within APAC. It is a link between the Indian and Pacific Oceans. The strait is one of the most important sea gateways in the world, which enables maritime routes to connect East Asia and SEA with Europe, the Middle East and Africa. The Strait of Malacca is used to transport approximately 25% of all the cargo sent by sea on the planet. Economies of the APAC nations as well as those of more distant European countries are all dependent on this sea link.

In recent years, tensions around the Strait of Malacca have been increasing. Territorial disputes between China and the nations in the region are on the rise, because of a number of islands in the South China Sea, which are located fairly close to the strait. The PRC has declared sovereignty over the Paracel Islands, the Spratly Islands and Scarborough Shoal. Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei and the Philippines dispute the Chinese claims. In 2014, the PRC began building artificial islands in disputed territories in order to install military equipment there. In 2016, the International Court of Justice in The Hague deemed China’s claims over the disputed territories as unlawful. But the PRC has rejected this decision and stated that it was prepared to fight for ownership by military means. Now that the tensions have risen, all the countries, whose economies are dependent on the Strait of Malacca, are concerned about its fate. China receives its oil from the Middle East via this sea route, and a blockade of the strait by PRC’s opponents will results in a serious blow to the Chinese economy. In turn, PRC’s armed forces, stationed on the
disputed islands of the South China Sea, may also blockade the Strait of Malacca. This will then cause problems for other nations whose economic interests are tied to the freedom of navigation in this region. These countries include France, which is the 5th largest economy in the world.

Earlier, France had a substantial presence in South East Asia, not far from the Strait of Malacca. It had vast colonies in Indochina, which included Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos. In 1945, Vietnamese communist forces, headed by Ho Chi Minh, staged an uprising and declared the nation’s independence from France. From 1946 to 1954, in the First Indochina War, the rebels defeated French forces, expelled them from their territories and declared Vietnam to be a sovereign nation. Within the same period, Cambodia and Laos also gained their independence.

In 1973, France established diplomatic ties with Vietnam, which, subsequently, fostered cooperation between the two nations. Twenty years later, in 1993, France’s President François Mitterrand paid a historic visit to Vietnam. The trip marked the beginning of a period, during which France–Vietnam relations developed rapidly. The two countries actively fostered economic cooperation with each other, and also improved their bilateral ties in the spheres of security, science and technology, education and medicine. Vietnamese admit that specialists who trained in France are at the foundation of the Vietnamese healthcare system.

By the end of 2013, 40 years after the diplomatic ties had been established, bilateral trade between France and Vietnam was $3.2 billion. France’s trade volumes with Vietnam put it in third place among other European nations. France was ranked as the second largest investor in the Vietnamese economy, and as the first lender (in terms of size of monetary funds extended to Vietnam as credit) in Europe. That same year, the two countries announced that their relationship was upgraded to a strategic partnership.

However, on the 45th anniversary marking the date the diplomatic ties between the two nations were established, France’s position in Vietnam weakened somewhat. And although bilateral trade between the two countries reached $4.6 billion in 2017, France was now ranked 5th (instead of 3rd) among trade partners with Vietnam. It is hard to label this development as a huge failure, especially since France still remains in first place among European nations that offer official development aid to Vietnam.

Still, the French administration began to consider new means of strengthening its relationship with Vietnam.

In April 2019, media outlets wrote about a report, prepared by the Foreign Affairs Committee of France’s National Assembly. The document stated that the South China Sea region (i.e. the Strait of Malacca) was a bridge between the Indian and Pacific Oceans, and a crucial transportation artery for France and all of Europe, whose importance would only grow in the nearest decades. Hence, the authors of the report believe France should strengthen its positions in this region by cooperating with nations that are keen on such collaboration.

The document also stated that no new breakthrough in France’s relationship with Vietnam was anticipated, as there was no military and technical cooperation between these two nations. According to the report, the reason why such bilateral cooperation is lacking is that there is robust military and technical cooperation (MTC) between Vietnam and Russia.

It is believed that the existence of military and technical cooperation illustrates a high level of trust between nations, and elevates a relationship to another level. Hence, as France developed its relations with South East Asia, it banked on its military industrial complex. It is well known that this nation is one of the global leaders in the aeronautical industry (and in its military branch). French fighter jets are world-famous and are used to arm many nations. However, attempts to promote them in markets in South East Asia have been unsuccessful. Some SEA nations do not have any fighter jets, and are not expected to buy any due to financial considerations. And SEA countries that can afford to purchase them do so from American, Chinese and Russian manufacturers who dominate this market sector. As for Vietnam’s military, it is almost fully equipped by Soviet and Russian fighter aircraft and helicopters.

The USSR began to actively support the Socialist Republic of Vietnam during its struggle for independence from 1946 to 1954. Since that time and up until the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the two nations enjoyed close cooperation, including in the military sector. This collaboration played an important role and helped the socialist forces of Vietnam to win the war, which lasted from 1957 to 1975, and to unify the country under its government. After 1991 Vietnam continued to develop relations with the rightful successor of the USSR, Russia. In 2001, the two countries signed a joint declaration on the Vietnam-Russia strategic partnership, and continued fostering their cooperation in the military and technical sphere. It is, therefore, not surprising that Vietnam, which has enjoyed a long-term reliable partnership with the USSR and then Russia, is not keen on establishing military and technical cooperation with France.
In the nearest future, the MTC between Russia and Vietnam will only grow, as the latter needs to add some clout to its territorial claims, on account of the previously described issues facing the South China Sea. Hence, Vietnam will need to strengthen its defenses and secure support from its dependable allies. The Russian Federation is just such an ally for Vietnam. One consolation for France could become the fact that Russia also supports compliance with international maritime laws and freedom of navigation in the Strait of Malacca.

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