

Statement

at the

Inaugural Session of Seminar

on

‘India-Vietnam Strategic Partnership: Future Directions’

by

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His Excellency....,His Excellency...,Ambassador Ranjit Rae, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen,

I would like to begin by expressing my deep gratitude to the Diplomatic Academy and the Government of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam for their generous assistance and support to the Embassy and the ICWA in organising this seminar. This is an important initiative to connect the academic and strategic communities of two especially friendly countries that have been cooperating closely for long.

A special privilege

I am particularly delighted to note that within the first month of my assuming the present responsibilities, I have the privilege to be in this great country. As someone who has studied and observed Vietnam for over four decades, may I take this opportunity to pay a sincere tribute to this heroic nation that confronted major powers successively in its quest for national independence and prevailed. It is worth stressing that the Indian people have great admiration for the people of Vietnam for their strong sense of discipline, capability to sacrifice and deep commitment to the cause of nation. Clearly Vietnam enjoys a very positive image in my country.

Allow me to introduce the august institution I represent here. The Indian Council of World Affairs or ICWA is India's unique, prestigious and oldest think tank in the field of foreign policy. Established in 1943 under the inspiration of Jawaharlal Nehru (who served as India's first Prime Minister for 17 years), it is devoted to the study, research, debate, crafting of policy options and dissemination

of knowledge in regard to India's role in international affairs. The Parliament of India has bestowed on ICWA the status of 'an institution of national importance.' The Vice President of India is *ex officio* the president of our governing council. We receive valuable assistance from the Government, but we enjoy operational autonomy that is critical for an objective intellectual inquiry into foreign policy challenges facing the country.

Importance of 2012

For India, the strategic partnership with Vietnam is undoubtedly one of the most important external relationships. When a complete history of India-Vietnam relations is written, historians may emphasize the exceptional importance of the current year – 2012. We celebrate together the 40th Anniversary of the establishment of full diplomatic relations, the 5th Anniversary of commencement of Strategic Partnership, 'the Year of India-Vietnam Friendship' and 'the Year of India in Vietnam.' This is also a historic year for India - ASEAN relations as both sides have been holding celebrations to mark two decades of India's Dialogue Partnership with ASEAN, which will culminate in the commemorative India-ASEAN Summit to be hosted by us for the first time.

India's multi-dimensional relations with Vietnam have their origin in ancient times. As a former Indian ambassador to Vietnam and Cambodia observed in a recent Paper, India's cultural interaction with many lands in Southeast Asia including Champa, the modern-day central and southern Vietnam, left 'an indelible impression' on almost every aspect of life, and the unique feature of this process was that it was 'entirely peaceful.' Our collective memory and history of rich connections and exchanges through trade, culture, religious influences and ideas

provide a solid foundation. This relationship has been renewed and revitalized, thanks to the endeavours of several generations of our leaders. Our common experience of coping with colonialism and success in overthrowing it, and our shared commitment to guard our independence represent vital bonds. Similar strategies to open our economies in order to make them increasingly a part of the process of globalisation have brought us closer together. Our common goals and interests in Asia-Pacific have also been of critical significance in imparting both substance and momentum to our relationship.

An overview

This bilateral seminar, in my view, has a two-fold purpose: a) to evaluate the relationship as it stands today and b) to initiate a candid but constructive dialogue among experts as they reflect on and chart future directions. This meaningful exercise should help us in crafting suitable policy options and recommendations for consideration by our Governments, business communities and civil society leaders.

An overview may indicate that most elements essential for a healthy and cooperative relationship are in place.

Firstly, regular dialogue at the highest political levels has been a reality. Jawaharlal Nehru was among the first foreign leaders who visited here after your historic victory in Dien Bien Phu. In 1954, President Ho Chi Minh visited India in 1958 and President Rajendra Prasad came here in 1959. This tradition has continued, culminating in the last two major visits, one by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh who attended the 8th ASEAN – India Summit and 5th East

Asian Summit in Hanoi in October 2010 and the other by President Truong Tan Sang who visited India in October 2011.

Secondly, existing institutional arrangements have been useful and effective in sustaining dialogue at multiple levels. The Joint Commission chaired by Foreign Ministers has ensured consultations on political, diplomatic, trade, economic, cultural, scientific and technological cooperation. Different mechanisms at the level of Vice Minister involving Ministries of Defence, External Affairs and Home Affairs have focused on issues falling in their respective domains. Besides, business-to-business dialogue is arranged through a bilateral Business Forum.

Thirdly, the two countries stand linked with each other through a rich package of agreements, which was further expanded during the last State visit. Agreements cover a wide and diverse field. The question of their implementation and adequacy of the areas covered may, however, need a discussion.

Key issues

In particular, three aspects of the relationship have drawn considerable public attention. The first relates to trade, economic and energy cooperation, construed in the larger sense. Bilateral trade has seen a steady growth, with the value of total trade reaching \$3.9 billion in 2011 and a target of \$7 billion set for 2015. Other legs of the economic relationship are expanding investment flows, a series of initiatives taken for capacity-building, technical assistance, technological cooperation and various lines of credit extended by India. Certain energy

exploration projects have been under intense business and media scanner in recent months. The need now is to assess the potential for energy cooperation, both in conventional and non-conventional spheres. Given the importance of these themes, two sessions will be devoted to them. I suggest that we leave enough room for expression of views by business leaders too. A separate session is planned on cooperation relating to knowledge economy. We should also find time to discuss further scope of cultural cooperation and people-to-people contacts. It is our considered view that enormous untapped potential exists for developing soft power linkages between India and Vietnam.

The second aspect pertains to security and defence cooperation, an important pillar of strategic partnership. Defense and security relations between India and Vietnam have made significant progress, as evident from regular high-level visits, strategic discussions, provision of military training facilities and joint naval exercises. Perhaps there have been some disappointments too. We will need to study and take stock of traditional as well as non-traditional threats such as climate change, environmental degradation, natural disasters, energy security and serious diseases. Our goal should be, if I may suggest, to examine them from our respective national perspectives in order to establish the areas of convergence and divergence, if any. A full session will be dedicated to this subject.

The third facet, a phenomenon of central importance, is that the bilateral relationship needs to be viewed in the specific context of today's regional situation and the likely shape it may assume in the foreseeable future. Vietnam has been at the focal point in the power politics and the strategic framework of Southeast Asia. As part of its Look East Policy, India recognises Vietnam's significant position in ASEAN. Our country is committed to the ASEAN principles of friendship and

cooperation, supports the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and ASEAN Defence Ministers' Plus Eight Meeting, and acknowledges the vital role of the East Asia Summit (EAS). The two countries need to further strengthen cooperation at regional and international fora, with the aim of promoting peace, stability, development and prosperity in East Asia.

Being 'maritime neighbours', India and Vietnam face common security challenges. India wishes to see an atmosphere of peace, tranquility and cooperation prevail in the region because it is absolutely essential for continuation of the region's economic progress. The dream of many to turn 21st century into 'an Asian Century' would become a reality only if Asia remains at peace with itself. We in India are particularly concerned about rising tensions in East Sea/South China Sea. We attach importance to ensuring safety and security of sea lanes of communication as well as freedom of navigation. We favour resolution of all disputes and differences through peaceful means and negotiations. We shall have an opportunity to discuss this subject in depth as part of our dialogue on the evolving security architecture in the Asia-Pacific region.

Conclusion

In the end, I should reiterate that ICWA is fully committed to deepening and strengthening understanding through dialogue between the academic and strategic communities of our countries. The Track- II exchanges have assumed much greater importance in diplomatic discourse today than ever before. I am confident that this seminar will make a highly valuable contribution to the expanding dialogue between Vietnam and India.
