

Remarks

by

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at

Roundtable

“Indo -Vietnam Cooperation in Emerging Asia”

on

Session

‘India-Vietnam: New Waves of Strategic Engagement’

at

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It is an honour to chair this session. I congratulate PIF and its Managing Director, Dr. Rajiv Kumar, for the commendable initiative to organize this Roundtable as a curtain-raiser for the forthcoming visit of the prime minister of Vietnam to India.

Our institution, ICWA, has been actively engaged in research and outreach activities concerning India-Vietnam relations, especially in the past three years. I was privileged to lead a delegation of scholars to Vietnam in July 2012. We hosted a public lecture by H.E. Mr. Pham Binh Minh, minister for foreign affairs of Vietnam, at Sapru House in July 2013. In January 2014, our Research Fellow specializing in ASEAN affairs, Dr. Rahul Mishra, published the Issue Brief entitled “India-Vietnam: New Waves of Strategic Engagement”, the precise theme of this particular session. I am glad that he too is present here today.

With this brief backdrop, let us plunge into the heart of the subject assigned to us. By way of preliminary remarks as the Chair, may I make a few observations and raise a few questions which may be addressed by our distinguished panel.

Firstly, ‘strategic engagement’ refers to the fact that our relationship with Vietnam covers all important sectors of bilateral activity; that bilateral relations are marked by growing substance; and that these relations are of critical importance to the national interests of each country. It is a mature partnership which, however, has not realized its full potential yet. I am not sure if we need ‘new waves’ of engagement or whether a mature strategic partnership needs to move forward consistently on an upward trajectory. What is, however, clear is that this relationship should be examined in the larger geopolitical and geo-economic context.

Secondly, our broad East Asian region, or whatever name one may choose to give it, is stamped today by strategic competition, contest and tensions as well as by growing economic opportunities. The challenge is how to manage the former and leverage the latter to the maximum degree. We do not really know what the year 2050 might bring, but as scholars and strategic analysts, we should be clear about more immediate prospects: what is in store for East Asia in the coming decade, especially concerning inter-relationships involving the four major powers – US, China, Japan and India – and perhaps two middle powers – Australia and South Korea? This question is relevant because it will impact on the future of India-Vietnam relations.

Thirdly, we need to give a close but fresh look to the India-ASEAN partnership. In reality, what does the Enhanced Look East Policy of LEP 3.0 or Act East Policy mean or should mean? And where does Vietnam fit in India's changing calculus?

Fourthly, a critical and dispassionate assessment of India-Vietnam relations i.e. those facets which have not been covered in the previous session, would be desirable. When we have soaked up all available information about our cultural and civilizational ties, post-colonial bonds, a regular stream of VVIP visits and a long series of agreements and MoUs that have been signed, the question that stares us is this: are we content with the level and quality of bilateral cooperation? If not, what are the constraints and how can we remove them? Our governments are doing what they can, but can we, as strategic community, advise them to do some things differently or to do something more?

Finally, as this room is filled with more Indians than Vietnamese participants, we should particularly listen to Vietnamese voices with due attention. In this context, I recall what the Vietnamese foreign minister stated at Sapru House last year, and I quote:

I am of the view that peace cannot be guaranteed by defence means alone. The answer to peace may lie in the ever expanding network of countries, in overall connectivity and linkage of economic, trade, political, security, cultural and social fields. We must do so not only between countries, but also at different levels: among sub-regions, intra-regional and inter-regional. By this profound integration, we can create intertwined interests, involve all players, enforce rules and norms, and minimize the potentials of conflict... In short, we in ASEAN welcome India's commitment and engagement with ASEAN with concrete measures. We all want to see more of India's presence in Southeast Asia, not only politically, but also economically.

I am confident that our distinguished panel will present before you a comprehensive appraisal of the subject, and this will be attempted in a practical and forward-looking fashion.

Thank you very much for your attention.
