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EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

India-Vietnam Enhanced CSP: A New Phase in the Indo-Pacific

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India-Vietnam Enhanced CSP: A New Phase in the Indo-Pacific

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INTERVIEW ANGLE

"Is the India-Vietnam partnership best understood as a China-balancing move or as standalone strategic logic in India's Act East doctrine?"

EDITORIAL SUMMARY:

The Hindu argues that Vietnamese General Secretary To Lam's state visit – the first by a top Vietnamese leader since the 2026 leadership transition – has elevated India-Vietnam ties to an Enhanced Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. New agreements on defence, technology, finance, energy and maritime cooperation advance a rules-based maritime order in the South China Sea and supply-chain resilience against Chinese coercion. The editorial cautions that the partnership has standalone strategic logic and should not be reduced to a China-balancing instrument.

FROM 1972 TO ENHANCED CSP

The India-Vietnam relationship is one of the more durable trajectories in Indian foreign policy. Diplomatic ties were established in 1972 at the height of the Vietnam war; political alignment was forged through Indira Gandhi's clear support for Hanoi. The relationship was upgraded to a Strategic Partnership in 2007, and to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in 2016 – making Vietnam one of only a handful of countries in this top tier of Indian diplomacy.

To Lam's May 2026 visit elevates the relationship a further notch to an Enhanced Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, with concrete deliverables across five baskets: defence and security, science and technology, finance, energy and maritime cooperation.

DEFENCE AND THE BRAHMOS MARKER

The most consequential thread is defence. The BrahMos **supersonic** cruise missile contract, signed in 2022 and with deliveries underway since 2025, made Vietnam the second foreign customer for the Indo-Russian flagship after the Philippines. Vietnam's interest is operational – coastal defence in the South China Sea – but the political signal is larger: a Southeast Asian state has chosen Indian-made strategic weapons for a maritime theatre directly contested with China.

The Enhanced CSP is expected to expand the defence basket to include a \$500 million Line of Credit for Vietnamese naval acquisitions, joint training, white-shipping data exchange and possible patrol-vessel cooperation. Cam Ranh Bay – Vietnam's deep-water natural harbour on the South China Sea – is geographically the most consequential port between the Malacca Strait and the East China Sea. India does not seek basing rights, but logistics access agreements are on the horizon.

ASEAN CENTRALITY AND THE INDO-PACIFIC

Vietnam is a pivot in India's **Act East Policy**, ASEAN engagement and Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI). Hanoi has championed ASEAN centrality without being constrained by ASEAN consensus on the South China Sea – in 2014 it broke with the bloc to file diplomatic notes against Chinese drilling in its EEZ.

For India, the IPOI – with its seven pillars covering maritime security, ecology, resources, capacity building, disaster management, S&T cooperation and trade – finds a willing partner in Vietnam, which leads the maritime-ecology pillar.

The simultaneous review of the ASEAN-India Trade in Goods Agreement (AITIGA), under negotiation since 2022, gives the Vietnam track political momentum. A more balanced AITIGA will need Hanoi's quiet support to overcome resistance in other ASEAN capitals.

BEYOND CHINA-BALANCING

The strategic temptation is to read every Indo-Pacific move as a China-balancing chess piece. The editorial cautions against this. India-Vietnam ties pre-date the post-2017 China challenge by half a century; they rest on civilisational, anti-colonial and Cold War foundations that have their own coherence. Treating Hanoi only as a balancing partner reduces a sovereign relationship to instrumental utility – and Hanoi, with its sophisticated bamboo diplomacy, will not accept that framing.

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Key arguments:

- India-Vietnam Enhanced CSP (2026) builds on a 1972-2007-2016 trajectory and elevates defence, technology, finance, energy and maritime cooperation.
- BrahMos exports, Cam Ranh Bay geography and IPOI pillars make Vietnam strategically central to India's Indo-Pacific posture.
- The partnership has standalone civilisational and Cold War-era roots; it is not reducible to China-balancing.
- Vietnam's record of resisting Chinese coercion in the South China Sea aligns with India's rules-based maritime order agenda.

Counterarguments:

- ASEAN consensus norms limit how far Hanoi can openly partner with New Delhi on hard-security issues.
- Vietnam's deepening defence ties with Russia create CAATSA and end-use complications for triangular Indo-Russian-Vietnamese cooperation.
- China is Vietnam's largest trade partner and political neighbour; Hanoi will calibrate every move with Beijing in mind.

Keywords: Enhanced Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, 1972 ties, 2007 SP, 2016 CSP, BrahMos export, Cam Ranh Bay, Act East Policy, ASEAN centrality, AITIGA review, Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative seven pillars, South China Sea, To Lam.

The Hindu's view is that the India-Vietnam partnership has reached the maturity threshold where it must be allowed to stand on its own logic. The Enhanced CSP gives the bilateral relationship a stable shelf in Indian foreign policy. The real test is whether New Delhi can sustain the partnership through phases when China-balancing is not the headline – because that is when Hanoi will judge whether India is a reliable strategic friend or a fair-weather one.

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