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## Vietnam-Japan Strategic Partnership Adding Substantial Contours

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Vietnam's President Truong Tan Sang is currently on a State-visit to Japan in what can be read as a calibrated attempt by both Vietnam and Japan to adding substantial contours to their existing Strategic Partnership to meet the security challenges confronting them.

The Vietnamese President in his ongoing visit is being accorded significant honours of a State Banquet by His Imperial Highness, The Emperor of Japan and also an Address to the Japanese Parliament. This should be indicative of the significance that Japan attaches to its strategic relationship with Vietnam.

The stark strategic reality that has emerged in recent years, more forcefully, is that China has emerged as a major security concern and military threat in the Asia Pacific and seems set to challenge the established security template in the Western Pacific to begin with. Japan and Vietnam located in the North and South of the Western Pacific and as major military powers and having issues of territorial sovereignty with China are prime focus of China's strategic ire.

Japan recognising the strategically pivotal location and role of Vietnam in South East Asia has constantly invested strategically, politically and economically in Vietnam over decades. Urgency to add more substantial contours to the Strategic Partnership arises seemingly from the aggressive military brinkmanship imposed by China in recent years on Vietnam in the South China Sea followed by East China Sea against Japan.

The urgency of reinforcing the Vietnam-Japan Strategic Partnership is visible from the frequency of high-level exchange of visits and strategic dialogues in 2013 and 2014. Japanese PM Abe visited Vietnam in January 2013 followed by visit of Vietnamese PM to Japan in

December 2013 and now the State-visit of Vietnamese President from March 16-19 2014. Interspersed were official level dialogues between the two countries.

The emphasis going by the statements on all three occasions was on bolstering of the Strategic Partnership between Vietnam and Japan. Preceding the presidential visit to Japan, the Vietnamese President in an interaction with the Japanese media in Hanoi besides touching on the political, economic, and scientific cooperation between the two nations stressed that during his visit to Japan he would seek greater security and defence cooperation from Japan.

Emphasis in this direction was further added by officials in Hanoi quoted in The Gulf News to the following effect:

- “The relationship between Hanoi and Tokyo has entered a new phase and is a strategic partnership with deeper trust contributing to peace and stability in the region and all over the world,”
- “Vietnam with a history of defeating many empires in the world is now together with Japan striving for a strategic partnership for peace and prosperity in the Asia Pacific region.”

Noticeably, Japan and Vietnam seem to have entered a new phase of their existing Strategic Partnership where Japan and Vietnam are likely to seek greater strategic convergences in how to best craft initiatives which could ensure maritime security in the maritime stretch of the Western Pacific.

Vietnamese President during this interaction with the Japanese media quoted above made the following points:

- Vietnam and Japan would discuss raising Strategic Partnership to a higher level
- Japan’s support will be sought for Vietnamese maritime security in terms of observance of maritime safety and security conventions and adherence to UNCLOS.
- Deal for supply of naval patrol vessels by Japan to Vietnam will be discussed.
- Japanese assistance will be sought to enhance Vietnam’s maritime capabilities.

Besides the security and defence spheres what needs to be highlighted is that Japan is deeply involved in the economic fields with Vietnam as being Vietnam’s biggest donor and foreign investor. Bilateral trade between Japan and Vietnam stood at \$ 25.6 billion in 2013 and FDI in 2013 as \$ 5.7 billion accounting for 26.6 % of FDI in Vietnam.

Japan is also investing heavily in terms of aid in infrastructure developments in Vietnam extending from airports, hydro-electric power stations and highways etc. Vietnam is also seeking Japanese assistance for a civilian nuclear power plant.

So what one is witnessing is the unfolding of a Vietnam-Japan Strategic Partnership in the sense of “comprehensive national security” with

Japan willing to underwrite the same. A strong Vietnam with its pivotal location could add substantially to Japan's own national security needs.

Vietnam-Japan Strategic Partnership should be a matter of special concern for China with the contextual background of China having adopted adversarial and militarily coercive measures against Vietnam and Japan in the South China Sea and the East China Sea. No public reactions have been aired by China other than a terse announcement of the Vietnamese President's visit to Japan and some economic data.

Noticeably, elsewhere in the region and globally too there has been wide coverage and comments on the strategic aspects of the growing security cooperation between Vietnam and Japan.

Analytically, Vietnam's strategic vision needs to be complimented in that Vietnam today has substantive "strategic partnerships" with Japan and India, Asia's two other emerging powers and in contention with China for Asian strategic space and Asian security and stability.

Vietnam's strategic partnerships with Japan and India need not be viewed as the beginning of some new security alliance in Asia Pacific. It needs to be viewed as the formation of two interlinking strategic arrangements where all three countries share common strategic concerns and have a marked degree of strategic convergences in dealing with the security challenges in the Asia Pacific.

One last point that needs to be emphasised is that the Vietnam-Japan Strategic Partnership and the Vietnam-India Strategic Partnership are independent of Japan and India's relations with the United States and further that these Strategic Partnerships are between Asian powers only.

Concluding, arising from the above one should logically expect that both Vietnam and Japan will strive to add substantive contours to the Vietnam-Japan Strategic Partnership in the coming years, with special reference to maritime security and aviation security in the Western Pacific so that freedom of navigation and movement is ensured in the "global commons" both maritime and aviation as per international norms. The visit of the Vietnamese President from March 16-19 2014 needs to be viewed as a defining moment in the evolution of a substantive Vietnam-Japan Strategic Partnership.

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