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## Vietnam: Indian Prime Minister Modi's Significant Visit September 2016

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Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modis' scheduled visit to Vietnam is significantly well-timed strategically and politically besides reinforcing the time-honoured Vietnam-India Strategic Partnership and making-up for the lack of an Indian Prime Ministerial visit during last 15 years.

Regrettable is the fact that India's Congress Prime Minister from 2004-14, Dr Manmohan Singh for ten long years could not find time to visit Vietnam and honour the spirit of the Vietnam-India Strategic Partnership, with which this was found. Obviously, what seems to have been in play was India then being overly sensitive to as to what would China think and read of such a visit?

Contextually, Prime Minister Modi's visit needs to be viewed against the backdrop of The Hague International Tribunal's recent ruling negating China's claims to sovereignty over the South China Sea, China vehemently opposing India's admittance in the Nuclear Suppliers Group, China vetoing the UN resolution to declare Pakistani terrorist leader Masood Azhar as an international terrorist and China's dismissive stance on India's objections to routing the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor through Pakistan Occupied Kashmir legally under Indian sovereignty.

Contextually again, Prime Minister Modi's Vietnam visit on September 3<sup>rd</sup> precedes his arrival in China the next day for the G-20 Summit. The contrast is stark in that in Vietnam the Indian Prime Minister will be welcomed as a valuable and honoured friend. In China the Indian Prime Minister would be conscious of the fact that it was only few weeks before that the Chinese President had rebuffed Prime Minister Modi's personal outreach for China's support on the NSG issue.

Prime Minister Modi's visit to Vietnam on September 03, 2016 emerges as strategically and politically significant for two major reasons. My

earlier Papers on Vietnam in the last fifteen years have consistently highlighted how high Vietnam should figure in India's strategic calculus and does not merit repetition again. What does need emphasis in 2016 is that Vietnam has regained its 'pivotal strategic significance' in the strategic calculations of the United States and Japan in relation to China's unremitting aggression in the South China Sea maritime expanse which is globally viewed as "global commons".

Asian security today depends heavily on strategic convergences between the United States, Japan and India to counter China's threatening military rise and propensity for dangerous and explosive military brinkmanship visible from India's High Himalayas to the South China Sea. With US President Obama and Japanese Prime Minister Abe having already visited Vietnam in recent times showing their implicit support to Vietnam bravely confronting China's aggression in the South China Sea, the Indian Prime Minister's visit to Vietnam was long overdue.

Politically, Prime Minister Modi's visit to Vietnam preceding his arrival in China for the G-20 Summit sends three appropriate political signals to China in terms of the conduct of India's foreign policy under the new political dispensation.

Unlike the previous ten years of Congress rule, India is now not going to be tentative and inhibited in extending open strategic support and military reinforcing of Vietnam's military capacities to face any Chinese aggression. In the same vein, the message that goes out to China is that India no longer will be constrained to be hypersensitive to China's strategic sensitivities in the execution of its 'Act East Policy'. China should read correctly that India would be sensitive to China's strategic sensitivities directly calibrated and directly proportional to China respecting India's strategic sensitivities. Thirdly, India will cooperate with the United States, Japan and Vietnam that peace, security and stability is ensured in Indo Pacific Asia. Indonesia and Australia would be the other nations that could line-up to support Vietnam.

The above, however, does not detract from the historical respect that exists between Vietnam and India over decades which precedes China's churning-up the South China Sea imbroglio to the detriment of Indo Pacific Asia. Vietnam was strategically important for India decades back and in 2016 Vietnam is far more strategically crucial for India's national security. It also does not signify that India in the pursuit of reinforcing its strategic partnership with Vietnam intends pushing Vietnam into a military confrontation with its overbearing and aggressive northern neighbour, that is, China.

India needs to remember that China can adopt a dual land -borders and maritime offensive against Vietnam to coerce Vietnam. The United States, Japan and India need to themselves work-out as to how they all singly or jointly will ensure that China is not tempted to resort to such a strategy against Vietnam. Vietnam needs to be assured on this count by all three countries. While such matters of statecraft will not surface in the open, it is hoped that Prime Minister Modi would designate Indian strategies to assist Vietnam in standing upto China as to how India would be able to assist in such contingencies.

South China Sea conflict escalation by China is Vietnam's prime and overriding concern currently and Vietnam expects its strategic partners to be forthcoming and bold in supporting Vietnam on this issue. With The Hague International Tribunal's ruling dismissing China's claims

over the South China Sea, legal cover now exists for India to be bolder in its assertions on this issue. It is hoped that Prime Minister would utilise his Vietnam visit as an opportunity to add more clarity on India's stances on the South China Sea.

Media reports suggest that China is planning offensive steps to flout The Hague International Tribunal's ruling nullifying its claims of sovereignty over the South China Sea and demonstrate that China has no respect for international rulings and conventions in pursuit of its strategic objectives. Immediate manifestation of China's aggressive intents have been assessed as declaring a Chinese ADIZ over the South China Sea and begin reclamation and construction on Scarborough Shoal belonging to the Philippines. The assessment is that China is holding back these misadventures till conclusion of the G-20 Summit in China to which the Indian Prime Minister is headed.

Concluding, in keeping with Prime Minister Modi's bold and assertive strategic foreign policy forays one fervently hopes that the era of India being overly considerate and supinely respectful of China's strategic sensitivities would finally be put to rest and India would now enter an era where India would now be guided by '*realpolitik*' rather than '*moralpolitik*' in its China-policy formulations. Further, India would need to be more bold in standing in support of its strategic partners to face aggression from any quarter.

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