

Received: 08 July, 2026

Accepted: 12 September, 2026

Published: 17 September, 2026

Strategic Autonomy and Peace-building in Vietnam–India Relations: Revisiting the Strategic Partnership within the Indo-Pacific Architecture

Quyen Le Huy

Gia Dinh University, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam; quyenlh@giadinh.edu.vn

Cite this article:

Quyen Le Huy (2026). Strategic Autonomy and Peace-building in Vietnam–India Relations: Revisiting the Strategic Partnership within the Indo-Pacific Architecture. *Revista Cultura Científica*, (24), pp. 1232–1242.

<https://doi.org/10.70517/revcc2624103>

Abstract

The intensification of strategic competition in the Indo-Pacific compels nations to simultaneously expand partnerships and maintain autonomy in policy choices. This study analyzes Vietnam–India relations to elucidate the interplay between strategic autonomy and peace-building during the development of their Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. Employing a qualitative case study approach, the research combines document analysis, thematic coding, and process tracing of relevant policy documents and scholarly works. The findings indicate that strategic autonomy serves as a crucial point of alignment between Vietnam and India, fostering trust and expanding cooperation without creat-

ing alliance obligations. A peace-oriented approach is demonstrated through the emphasis on sovereignty, international law, the peaceful resolution of disputes, and the maintenance of an inclusive regional architecture. Consequently, the study characterizes the Vietnam–India relationship as a non-alliance strategic partnership, wherein deep cooperation coexists with each nation's right to self-determination. This research contributes to broadening the interpretation of strategic partnerships beyond the logic of balance-of-power politics within the Indo-Pacific architecture.

Keywords: strategic autonomy, peace-building, Vietnam–India, non-alliance strategic partnership, Indo-Pacific

1. INTRODUCTION

The shift of strategic focus toward the Indo-Pacific region is transforming how middle powers define their positions, manage relations with major powers, and safeguard their foreign policy autonomy. Intensifying strategic competition among power centers not only creates new opportunities for cooperation but also deepens the pressures regarding choices, alignments, and the balancing of interests. Within this structure, India is increasingly asserting its role as an actor capable of shaping the regional order through its “Act East” policy and Indo-Pacific vision, while Vietnam pursues an approach emphasizing independence, self-reliance, and the multilateralization and diversification of foreign relations [1–3]. The convergence of these two orientations provides a significant basis for re-examining the nature of Vietnam-India relations amidst a shifting strategic landscape.

Bilateral relations were elevated to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in 2016, reflecting growing political trust and expanded cooperation across defense, security, economics, science and technology, and people-to-people exchanges [4, 5]. However, interpretations of this relationship’s development largely rely on the logic of converging geopolitical interests, particularly in light of regional power shifts. Sarma [6] argues that the Indo-Pacific concept has expanded the strategic space for Vietnam-India cooperation, while Thi Oanh and Thuy Nguyen [7] highlight certain similarities in how the two nations approach the regional order. Recent studies also indicate that Vietnam must simultaneously manage its relations with India, China, and other major powers through flexible policy choices to avoid dependence on any single power pole [8, 9]. However, interpreting the bilateral relationship primarily through the lens of power balancing fails to fully explain why Vietnam and India have been able to expand strategic cooperation while avoiding an adversarial alliance structure. This issue is directly linked to strategic autonomy. For Vietnam, autonomy entails not only the ability to maintain policy choices but also the limitation of strategic dependence and the expansion of room for maneuver amidst great-power competition [10, 11]. For India, a tradition of foreign policy autonomy continues to shape how it engages with regional structures without relinquishing strategic agency. This very compatibility may well be one of the deeper mechanisms explaining the resilience of the Vietnam-India relationship.

Another dimension rarely included in the same analytical framework is peacebuilding. Galtung [12] distinguished peace from the mere absence of war and emphasized the structural conditions required for a sustainable peaceful order. Viewed from this perspective, Vietnam-India cooperation can be examined not only through the lens of balance-of-power capabilities but also through principles such as respect for sovereignty, non-imposition, the peaceful resolution of disputes, and the maintenance of an inclusive regional structure. Historical and ideological foundations in the bilateral relationship also demonstrate that peace, independence, and self-determination are not entirely divorced from modern strategic behavior [13, 14].

Consequently, a gap in current research lies in the absence of an analytical framework linking strategic autonomy with peacebuilding to explain the Vietnam-India relationship. This article examines how these two principles interact during the development of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership and assesses whether the combination of autonomy, strategic trust, and a peace-oriented approach creates a cooperation model distinct from traditional alliance logic. Through the case of Vietnam and India, the study aims to clarify a broader possibility: that nations can enhance strategic cooperation within a competitive region without necessarily shifting toward an adversarial structure or compromising their own autonomy.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Research on Vietnam-India relations has established a relatively rich foundation; however, most existing works focus on three main areas: the historical and cultural underpinnings of the bilateral relationship; the evolution of the strategic partnership; and the impact of the Indo-Pacific structure on cooperation between the two countries. The first line of research emphasizes the enduring nature of Vietnam-India engagement, particularly through cultural and religious exchanges and layers of ideological influence. Majumdar [15] situates the relationship between India and Southeast Asia within a broad historical context, while Dinh [13] argues that Vietnam-India ties are driven not only by modern interests but also by historical and cultural foundations and shared experiences in the struggle for national independence. This perspective is complemented by studies on cultural diplomacy and people-to-people exchanges; notably, Le and Huynh [16] view socio-cultural connections as a resource that sustains the resilience of the bilateral relationship. Recent analyses of cultural diplomacy within the “Act East” framework further demonstrate that cultural factors are not peripheral to strategic calculations but can facilitate trust-building and the expansion of soft power [17, 18]. However, this body of research often stops at affirming the foundation of friendship or soft power, without clearly explaining the mechanisms by which historical and normative values are translated into strategic behavior.

The second line of research focuses on the process of upgrading Vietnam-India relations from traditional cooperation to a strategic partnership and, subsequently, a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. The 2016 document indicates that this upgrade reflects growing political trust and a desire to expand cooperation across defense, security, economics, science and technology, and people-to-people connectivity [4]. Naidu [5] views the bilateral relationship as an increasingly important

component of the emerging Indo-Pacific architecture, while Chaturvedy [19] highlights the trend toward expanding substantive cooperation between the two nations. Uyanaev [20] examines Vietnam-India relations over a span of five decades, demonstrating that the stability of the relationship does not hinge entirely on any specific geopolitical moment. Overall, this study confirms the growth of the strategic partnership but tends to explain this development through the expansion of cooperation areas and the convergence of interests, rather than through a theoretical framework of autonomy and peacebuilding.

A third line of inquiry situates the Vietnam-India relationship within the context of shifting power structures in the Indo-Pacific. Kesavan [21] and Horam [1] identify the “Act East” policy as a manifestation of India’s strategic recalibration to enhance eastward engagement, while Pandalai [2] analyzes the Indo-Pacific as a space where India seeks to integrate its security interests, sovereignty, and a vision for regional order. From the Vietnamese perspective, Thuong and Oanh [3] highlight how Vietnam positions itself in the region through a cautious, flexible approach that avoids direct confrontation. Sarma [6] as well as Thi Oanh and Thuy Nguyen [7] observe significant parallels in how Vietnam and India approach the Indo-Pacific, particularly regarding principles of freedom of navigation, international law, and the inclusivity of the regional architecture.

However, as strategic competition among major powers intensifies, some studies have shifted their focus toward balancing acts and strategic conduct. Hung et al. [8], analyze the Vietnam-India-China triangle through the lens of “two-level game” theory, illustrating how Vietnam must simultaneously manage external pressures and domestic policy imperatives. Nguyen et al. [9] also situate the actions of Vietnam and India within the broader strategic realignments of major powers in the Indo-Pacific. While these works offer valuable insights into the power dynamics at play, they risk reducing the Vietnam-India relationship to a mere reaction to great-power rivalry or the “China factor”.

Alongside these research strands, “strategic autonomy” is emerging as a crucial concept for explaining the behavior of nations that seek to expand cooperation without becoming locked into formal alliance structures. Studies on Vietnam emphasize autonomy as the capacity to maintain policy choices, limit dependency, and expand the scope for action amidst great-power competition [10, 11]. For India, the tradition of strategic autonomy is closely linked to the concept of foreign policy independence rooted in the Non-Aligned stance and the emphasis on self-determination found in Nehru’s foreign policy thinking [14]. However, the majority of the literature treats strategic autonomy as an attribute of individual nations rather than analyzing it as a compatible foundation capable of shaping bilateral relations.

Another avenue for broadening the analytical scope is peace theory. Galtung [12] distinguishes between negative and positive peace, shifting the focus from mere conflict prevention to the structural conditions that ensure stable and less coercive relationships. Singh [22] and Zhuravlev [23] further highlight the philosophical and normative dimensions of peace. Yet, studies on Vietnam-India relations have rarely employed this approach to analyze bilateral strategic cooperation.

The above overview reveals that the primary gap lies not in a lack of research on Vietnam-India relations, but rather in the fragmentation of analytical approaches. Historical and cultural studies explain the foundation of trust; geopolitical studies account for the convergence of interests; Indo-Pacific studies clarify the strategic environment; while strategic autonomy and peace are typically examined as distinct, separate topics. Few studies have linked these analytical levels to explain how the two nations can enhance defense and security cooperation while upholding the principle of non-alignment and preserving strategic autonomy.

Addressing this gap, this study places strategic autonomy and peacebuilding within a unified analytical framework. Strategic autonomy is viewed as a mechanism enabling Vietnam and India to expand cooperation without compromising policy choices; peacebuilding is approached as a set of principles and practices aimed at reducing coercion, maintaining dialogue, respecting sovereignty, and supporting an inclusive regional architecture. On this basis, the article examines whether the Vietnam-India relationship can be understood as a model of strategic cooperation grounded in a combination of normative compatibility, strategic interests, and the preservation of autonomy. This approach moves beyond purely balance-of-power explanations and provides a basis for assessing the contribution of the Vietnam-India relationship to a stable Indo-Pacific order that is not dictated by the logic of rigid alliances.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative case study design, focusing on the Vietnam–India relationship to elucidate how strategic autonomy and a peace-building orientation have shaped their Comprehensive Strategic Partnership within the Indo-Pacific architecture. This approach is suited to explaining the political and strategic mechanisms underpinning the bilateral relationship’s evolution, rather than merely measuring cooperation levels or cataloging the expansion of diplomatic activities. The units of analysis comprise policy orientations, foreign policy principles, and bilateral cooperation practices that demonstrate the capacity to maintain autonomy, build trust, and mitigate confrontational dynamics in the Vietnam–India relationship.

Data were gathered from two categories of sources. The first category consists of official documents reflecting the stances and policy choices of both nations—specifically the 2016 Joint Statement on the Establishment of the India–Vietnam

Comprehensive Strategic Partnership; reports and documents on bilateral relations from the Ministry of External Affairs [4, 24, 25]; and relevant policy papers and analytical works regarding the foreign policies, independence, autonomy, and peaceful cooperation of Vietnam and India. The second category comprises academic studies on Vietnam–India relations, the Act East policy, the Indo-Pacific, strategic autonomy, cultural diplomacy, and peace theories. Selected works met three criteria: direct relevance to the research question; the ability to provide evidence of strategic behavior or orientation; and utility for cross-referencing policy discourse with academic interpretations.

Data analysis was conducted using qualitative content analysis combined with thematic coding. Documents were reviewed and coded according to four conceptual categories: strategic autonomy, strategic trust, a peace-oriented approach, and non-aligned strategic cooperation. Regarding the “strategic autonomy” cluster, the study focuses on indicators such as independence in policy choices, the diversification of relations, the avoidance of dependency, and the preservation of room for maneuver. The “peace-building” cluster emphasizes respect for sovereignty, the peaceful resolution of disputes, adherence to international law, the inclusivity of regional structures, and the avoidance of alliances formed against a third party. The development of the coding scheme is guided by Galtung’s [12] concept of “positive peace” while being adapted to the empirical realities of the Vietnam-India relationship.

In addition to content analysis, the study employs process tracing to identify the evolution of the bilateral relationship from its historical-political foundations to a strategic partnership and, subsequently, a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. The objective is not to reconstruct the entire diplomatic history but to pinpoint specific moments and policy choices that reveal the interplay between strategic interests, the imperative of maintaining autonomy, and the need to preserve a peaceful environment. Interpretations are cross-referenced between official documents and academic literature to avoid reliance on a single source of discourse.

On this basis, the study utilizes an explanatory logic structured around the sequence of strategic autonomy, strategic trust, peace-oriented cooperation, and partnership adaptability. This framework does not presuppose a linear causal relationship; rather, it serves to examine whether empirical evidence demonstrates a stable link among these four elements. This approach enables an assessment of the Vietnam-India relationship that transcends purely balance-of-power-based explanations while maintaining the necessary caution when drawing inferences from a single case study.

4. RESEARCH FINDINGS

4.1. STRATEGIC AUTONOMY AS A POINT OF CONVERGENCE IN THE FOREIGN POLICY CHOICES OF VIETNAM AND INDIA

Document analysis reveals that strategic autonomy is a notable point of convergence between Vietnam and India, even though the concept emerged from different historical contexts and is articulated through policy language that is not entirely identical. The common ground lies not in a shared foreign policy doctrine, but in the need to preserve policy autonomy as the external environment is increasingly shaped by competition among power centers.

For India, independence in foreign policy decision-making is deeply rooted in history. Nehru’s foreign policy philosophy emphasized the ability to define national interests independently and to avoid having Indian policy dictated by the polarization of the international system [14]. This legacy does not imply that India remains aloof from cooperative structures. On the contrary, the transition from “Look East” to “Act East” demonstrates New Delhi’s increased engagement with Southeast Asia and the broader Indo-Pacific region, while still maintaining significant strategic flexibility. Kesavan [21] identifies “Act East” as a crucial adjustment in India’s Asian policy, while Hiram [1] contextualizes this shift within the region’s changing geopolitics. Thus, India increasingly exercises autonomy through multi-layered engagement rather than by distancing itself from regional structures.

Vietnam has arrived at a similar choice, albeit from a different trajectory. In an environment where China, the United States, India, Japan, and various other actors coexist, maintaining autonomy requires Vietnam to simultaneously expand its network of relations and mitigate the risk of strategic dependency. Thuong and Oanh [3] demonstrate that Vietnam’s Indo-Pacific approach is rooted in the imperative to safeguard national interests while remaining aligned with ASEAN and the principles of the regional order. Recent studies on Vietnam’s strategic autonomy also emphasize the capacity for self-determination, the diversification of relations, and the ability to manage pressures arising from great-power competition [10, 11].

Consequently, the relationship with India holds significance beyond that of a standard bilateral partnership. Expanding cooperation with New Delhi enables Hanoi to broaden its strategic options without incurring the constraints typically associated with formal alliances. Conversely, the relationship with Vietnam provides India with a key partner in Southeast Asia—aligning with its “Act East” policy, without requiring New Delhi to structure its regional presence around the logic of rigid alliances. This compatibility stems from the fact that both nations benefit from deeper cooperation, yet neither requires the other to relinquish its foreign policy autonomy.

This becomes clearer when viewing bilateral relations within the competitive structure of the Indo-Pacific. Strategic

adjustments by China, India, and the United States are exerting strategic pressure on regional nations [9]. Vietnam, in particular, must navigate a complex relational landscape where developing ties with India proceeds alongside maintaining relations with China and other partners. Analysis by Hung et al. [8] regarding the Vietnam–India–China triangle indicates that Vietnam’s policy cannot be adequately explained by a binary choice between alignment and confrontation. Relations with India provide greater room for maneuver but do not equate to a shift toward an alliance aimed at directly balancing against China.

This finding highlights a key characteristic: strategic autonomy in the Vietnam–India relationship is mutually reinforcing rather than unilateral. Each side expands its range of options through its relationship with the other, while the cooperative framework does not require the sacrifice of autonomy. This creates favorable conditions for the relationship to flourish in a competitive environment without becoming locked into regional polarization.

4.2. FROM STRATEGIC COMPATIBILITY TO TRUST-BUILDING WITHIN THE COMPREHENSIVE STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP

While strategic autonomy explains the impetus for cooperation between Vietnam and India, it is insufficient to account for the relationship’s stability. Analysis reveals that a crucial mediating factor is the process of building strategic trust. Trust in this context does not imply perfectly aligned interests; rather, it stems from the relative predictability of the partner’s intentions, the stability of commitments, and the recognition that cooperation does not threaten the other party’s autonomy.

A shared historical foundation helps lower the costs of building trust. Dinh [13] argues that the momentum behind Vietnam-India relations stems from a combination of historical ties and contemporary cooperation needs. Uyanaev [20], examining five decades of bilateral relations, also highlights a significant degree of continuity despite shifts in the international system. What is noteworthy is not that history automatically generates strategic relations, but rather the absence of major legacies of bilateral conflict capable of creating a severe security dilemma. This distinguishes the Vietnam-India relationship from many other pairings in Asia.

Cultural connections continue to provide a social foundation for that trust. Long-standing ties between India and Southeast Asia are documented in Majumdar’s [15] historical research, while contemporary cultural diplomacy and people-to-people exchanges ensure that bilateral relations are not confined to interactions between state agencies [16]. Jyoti [17] situates Vietnam-India cultural diplomacy within the “Act East” framework and highlights its value in sustaining links between the two societies. From a public diplomacy perspective, cultural assets can help foster a perception environment conducive to political relations [18]. While they do not replace security interests, they mitigate the purely transactional nature of the relationship.

A pivotal shift occurred when trust was institutionalized into a formal partnership. The establishment of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in 2016 represented more than a mere change in diplomatic nomenclature. The joint statement indicates an expanded scope of cooperation across multiple sectors; while defense and security hold a significant place, they are not isolated from economics, development, science and technology, and people-to-people exchanges [4]. Documents from the Ministry of External Affairs [24, 25] continue to reflect the trend of maintaining and diversifying cooperation channels.

Notably, defense cooperation does not entail a collective defense commitment. This is a significant point for understanding strategic trust. The two countries can enhance cooperation in sensitive areas without transforming their relationship into a formal alliance. Naidu [5] views the Vietnam-India relationship as increasingly significant within the Indo-Pacific architecture, while Sarma [6] identifies substantial convergence in how both nations perceive the regional environment. Trust, therefore, appears to be built on the principle that cooperation can deepen without compromising either party’s autonomy.

This distinction helps explain an apparent paradox. Typically, higher levels of security cooperation might lead to expectations of tighter strategic alignment. The Vietnam-India case, however, demonstrates a different trend: the depth of cooperation can increase alongside the maintenance of distance from a formal alliance. Autonomy does not preclude trust; on the contrary, mutual respect for autonomy becomes a prerequisite for trust to flourish.

The analysis thus identifies a noteworthy chain of connections: compatibility regarding the need for autonomy alleviates concerns about a partner’s intentions; reduced anxiety facilitates the accumulation of trust; and this growing trust further expands the scope for cooperation in sensitive areas. The Comprehensive Strategic Partnership can be understood as the institutionalized outcome of this process, rather than merely a reaction to a transient shift in the balance of power.

4.3. PEACEBUILDING AS AN OPERATING PRINCIPLE OF VIETNAM-INDIA STRATEGIC COOPERATION

A third finding concerns how peace is situated within the relationship between strategy and regional order. If peacebuilding is understood solely as post-conflict intervention, the concept fails to fully capture the nuances of the

Vietnam-India case. Galtung's [12] approach opens up a broader analytical scope by distinguishing between negative peace, the absence of direct violence and positive peace, which is linked to relational and structural conditions that limit forms of coercion. In the bilateral relationship under study, the value of this concept lies in its ability to examine how strategic cooperation can be organized without creating a new adversarial structure.

Policy documents indicate significant alignment between Vietnam and India regarding principles of sovereignty, international law, the peaceful resolution of disputes, and the maintenance of an open regional order. The 2016 declaration establishing a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership situated the bilateral relationship within the broader principles of regional peace, stability, and cooperation [4]. This convergence is also evident in analyses concerning the Indo-Pacific. Sarma [6] identifies compatibilities in the two countries' approaches, while Thi Oanh and Thuy Nguyen [7] argue that the perspectives of Vietnam and India on the Indo-Pacific provide a favorable foundation for advancing bilateral ties.

It is important to distinguish that a peace-oriented approach is not synonymous with avoiding the development of security capabilities. Both Vietnam and India have an interest in strengthening their capacity to safeguard sovereignty and maintain a stable maritime environment. Consequently, defense cooperation and a peace-oriented stance do not necessarily represent conflicting logics. In this context, capacity building can foster autonomy and reduce vulnerability to external pressure, provided it does not translate into a commitment to confront a specific actor.

This point is particularly significant for the South China Sea and the broader maritime domain. The Indo-Pacific architecture is increasingly shaped by great-power competition, yet Vietnam has no interest in transforming every strategic relationship into a tool for confrontation. India, too, pursues its maritime interests and a regional role while simultaneously championing an inclusive Indo-Pacific vision [2]. It is precisely this combination of capability and restraint that enables the Vietnam-India relationship to contribute to stability without creating a new adversarial pole.

From the perspective of the philosophy of peace, Singh [22] links peace to dignity, freedom, and the manner in which political communities structure their mutual relations. Zhuravlev [23] similarly approaches peacebuilding as a process that extends far beyond the mere cessation of hostilities. When these insights are applied to the Vietnam-India context, a key characteristic emerges: peace is associated with autonomy rather than submission to an externally imposed order. A nation struggles to sustain peaceful relations if it lacks the capacity to make relatively independent choices in the face of coercive pressure.

In this sense, strategic autonomy and peacebuilding are not merely parallel goals; they are mutually reinforcing. Autonomy provides the capacity to reject forced polarization, while peacebuilding establishes the principles that allow autonomy to be exercised without devolving into isolationism or strategic egoism. The Vietnam-India relationship exemplifies this synergy through expanded cooperation, all while upholding a discourse centered on the rule of law, dialogue, and inclusivity—and avoiding any stance directed against a third party.

This finding also challenges interpretations that rely exclusively on the "China factor". China's rise and behavior clearly constitute a component of the strategic environment that both Hanoi and New Delhi must take into account [8, 9]. However, if China were the sole driver of cooperation, the Vietnam-India relationship would be difficult to explain in terms of its historical depth, multi-sectoral nature, and steadfast adherence to a non-aligned structure. While the power landscape provides the impetus, the two countries' responses to that context are shaped by choices regarding autonomy and a peaceful order.

4.4. THE VIETNAM-INDIA RELATIONSHIP AS A MODEL OF NON-ALIGNED STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

The synthesis of the three analytical axes above reveals a broader characteristic of the Vietnam-India relationship: it can be viewed as a form of "non-aligned strategic partnership". This concept is not intended merely to coin a new diplomatic label; rather, it describes a relational structure in which the two countries enhance coordination on strategic issues without establishing collective defense obligations, surrendering policy autonomy, or defining their relationship primarily through confrontation with a third country.

This model rests on four interconnected elements. First, both sides maintain autonomy in defining their interests and selecting partners. Second, mutual trust is sufficiently high to allow cooperation to extend into sensitive areas. Third, the relationship is grounded in principles promoting peace, the rule of law, and regional inclusivity. Fourth, the cooperative structure is flexible, enabling each party to simultaneously maintain relations with other centers of power.

This structure aligns with the emerging characteristics of the Indo-Pacific. This space is defined not merely by great-power competition or mechanisms like the Quad; it also encompasses a network of partnerships with varying degrees of institutionalization. Pandalai [2] demonstrates that India's vision for the region cannot be reduced to a formal alliance structure. Naidu [5] also situates the Vietnam-India relationship within the evolving Indo-Pacific architecture while emphasizing the distinct strategic value of their bilateral ties. From Vietnam's perspective, its regional positioning reflects a need to uphold ASEAN, international law, and policy autonomy [3].

Consequently, the Vietnam-India partnership can function as a “node” within the regional network of relations rather than a link in an adversarial bloc. Its value lies not in replacing an alliance but in expanding the capacity for action on both sides. Vietnam gains a key partner in politics, security, technology, and development, while India strengthens its presence in Southeast Asia and adds substance to its “Act East” policy. Chaturvedy [19] observes that the bilateral relationship continues to shift from a foundation of friendship toward increasingly substantive cooperation, while official Indian documents indicate that the scope of the relationship extends far beyond any single domain [24, 25].

However, this model also has its limitations. A non-alliance approach affords flexibility but implies that the level of security commitment cannot be assumed to match that of a formal alliance. Strategic alignment does not eliminate differences regarding priorities, capabilities, or each country’s relationships with other actors. Strategic autonomy may even lead to instances where the two sides do not choose the same course of action when faced with the same issue. Therefore, the resilience of the relationship should be measured not by the degree of policy alignment, but by the ability to manage differences without undermining the foundation of cooperation.

Based on the evidence analyzed, the Vietnam-India relationship can be conceptualized as a sequence: compatibility regarding strategic autonomy → trust accumulation → expansion of non-alliance-based cooperation → reinforcement of peace-oriented practices → enhanced adaptability of the partnership. This sequence does not represent a strictly linear cause-and-effect chain; the elements exert reciprocal influence: successful cooperation reinforces trust; trust lowers the costs associated with autonomy; a peaceful environment expands the scope for cooperation; and diversified cooperation renders the relationship less dependent on any single geopolitical issue.

The most significant finding, therefore, does not lie in whether Vietnam and India “stand on the same side” amidst Indo-Pacific competition. The evidence better supports a different interpretation: the two nations are building a relationship that is close enough to generate strategic value, yet flexible enough to avoid compromising each other’s autonomy. While strategic autonomy places limits on alignment, those very limits can actually strengthen the relationship by tempering expectations of subservience or policy uniformity. Within this framework, peace-building is not antithetical to strategy; rather, it shapes the manner in which strategic interests are pursued.

The Vietnam-India case thus illustrates an alternative possibility for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific: a substantial space exists between neutrality and formal alliance for deep partnerships. Within this space, nations can build capacity, share security interests, coordinate on regional order, and enhance trust without committing to a rigid adversarial structure. For Vietnam and India, the ability to maintain a balance—between cooperation and autonomy, capacity and restraint, and national interests and regional stability—may prove decisive for the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership’s adaptability amidst future shifts in the Indo-Pacific architecture.

5. DISCUSSION

The study’s findings indicate that the Vietnam-India relationship cannot be fully explained solely through the logic of power balancing in the Indo-Pacific. While intensifying competition among China, the United States, India, and other power centers clearly generates new drivers for bilateral cooperation [8, 9], this structural factor explains the need to expand ties rather than the specific form those ties have taken. Vietnam and India have deepened cooperation in defense, security, and maritime affairs without transitioning to a military alliance or establishing collective defense obligations. These findings challenge interpretations that view the bilateral relationship primarily as a reaction to shifting power dynamics.

Strategic autonomy offers a more fitting explanation for the apparent paradox between deepening cooperation and the absence of a formal alliance. For both nations, autonomy does not equate to distancing oneself from partners; rather, it is demonstrated by the capacity to expand cooperation while retaining the freedom of policy choice. For India, the shift from traditional non-alignment to active engagement through the Act East and Indo-Pacific policies does not negate the imperative of strategic autonomy [1, 2]. For Vietnam, the multilateralization and diversification of relations serve to expand the scope for maneuver rather than to choose one power pole over another [3, 10]. Bilateral relations can thus remain sustainable precisely because they do not require strategic alignment.

This finding complements the studies by Sarma [6], Naidu [5], and Thi Oanh and Thuy Nguyen [7]. Those works have highlighted significant convergence between Vietnam and India regarding their perspectives on the Indo-Pacific, international law, and the regional order. The present study goes a step further by arguing that a convergence of interests translates into a stable partnership only when mediated by strategic trust and mutual respect for autonomy. In this context, trust does not require the two parties to share identical views on every issue; rather, it is sustained by the predictability that neither side will exploit the bilateral relationship to constrain the other’s policy choices. This helps explain why cooperation in sensitive areas can expand without entailing a corresponding level of dependency.

The peace-building dimension further clarifies the significance of this relational structure. According to Galtung [12], peace cannot be reduced merely to the absence of war; it also entails conditions that limit coercion and enable the maintenance of stable relations. In the context of Vietnam–India ties, defense cooperation is not necessarily antithetical to peace, provided that capacity building is grounded in autonomy, adherence to international law, the peaceful resolution

of disputes, and the avoidance of structures designed to oppose a third party. This perspective differs from the notion that peace-building is exclusively a post-conflict activity. At the interstate level, peace-building can also manifest through cooperative arrangements that reduce the pressure to choose sides and curb the perpetuation of strategic polarization.

Consequently, the concept of a “non-aligned strategic partnership” offers valuable explanatory power for the Vietnam–India relationship. It occupies a middle ground between the two poles frequently cited in international relations studies: formal alliance and neutrality. This relationship is deep enough to generate strategic value yet flexible enough to allow both parties to maintain distinct ties with other major powers and regional institutions. This aligns with Pandalai’s [2] assertion that the Indo-Pacific architecture cannot be understood solely through the lens of alliances, while also reinforcing Naidu’s [5] argument regarding the unique position of the Vietnam–India relationship within this emerging regional structure.

Thus, the study’s primary contribution lies not merely in affirming the shared interests of Vietnam and India, but in identifying the mechanisms that transform those interests into sustainable cooperation. The progression strategic autonomy, strategic trust, peace-oriented cooperation, and an adaptable strategic partnership demonstrates that deep cooperation does not inevitably lead to a formal alliance, nor does autonomy necessarily undermine cooperation. In an increasingly competitive Indo-Pacific, the Vietnam-India relationship demonstrates the viability of a strategic partnership wherein preserving autonomy and maintaining regional stability are mutually reinforcing rather than conflicting objectives.

6. CONCLUSION

The study reveals that the evolution of Vietnam-India relations within the Indo-Pacific architecture cannot be fully explained by power competition or the convergence of geopolitical interests. The analysis indicates that strategic autonomy provides a crucial foundation of compatibility between the two nations, where expanded cooperation does not entail relinquishing policy choices. This compatibility facilitates the building of strategic trust, the expansion of cooperation in sensitive areas, and the maintenance of the relationship without it transforming into an adversarial alliance.

The article demonstrates that strategic autonomy and peacebuilding are complementary rather than mutually exclusive. An emphasis on sovereignty, international law, the peaceful resolution of disputes, and the inclusivity of the regional architecture establishes normative boundaries for the pursuit of strategic interests. On this basis, the Vietnam-India relationship can be characterized as a form of non-aligned strategic partnership, where the depth of cooperation is balanced with the preservation of each party’s autonomy.

The study contributes by linking strategic autonomy, trust, and peacebuilding within a unified explanatory framework for the bilateral relationship. However, as the research relies primarily on document analysis and a single case study, its findings do not yet allow for broad generalization. Future research could compare the Vietnam-India relationship with other strategic partnerships and incorporate expert interviews alongside longitudinal policy discourse analysis to further examine the mechanisms linking autonomy, trust, and the partnership’s adaptability.

DATA AVAILABILITY

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the author upon reasonable request.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

FUNDING

No specific funding was reported for this work.

DECLARATION OF GENERATIVE AI AND AI-ASSISTED TECHNOLOGIES IN THE WRITING PROCESS

In the course of preparing this manuscript, the author employed ChatGPT to improve the linguistic quality and readability of the content. After utilizing this AI tool, the authors conducted comprehensive review and necessary revisions to ensure the accuracy, integrity, and scientific rigor of the manuscript. All authors bear full responsibility for the final content of the published work, including any errors or inconsistencies that may arise.

REFERENCES

- [1] Horam, Mungreishang. “Contextualizing India’s ‘Act East’ Policy within the Geopolitical Dynamics of the Asia-Pacific Region.” *Indian Journal of Asian Affairs*, vol. 35, no. 1, 2022, pp. 58–72. *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27146667>.

- [2] Pandalai, Shruti. “The Indo-Pacific Consensus: The Past, Present and Future of India’s Vision for the Region.” *India Quarterly*, vol. 78, no. 2, 2022, pp. 189–209. *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48673660>.
- [3] Nguyen Le Thy Thuong and Nguyen Thi Oanh. “Vietnam in the Indo-Pacific Region: Perception, Position and Perspectives.” *India Quarterly*, vol. 77, no. 2, 2021, pp. 129–42.
- [4] India. Ministry of External Affairs. “Joint Statement between India and Vietnam during the Visit of Prime Minister to Vietnam.” 3 Sept. 2016, https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/27362/Joint_Statement_between_India_and_Vietnam_during_the_visit_of_Prime_Minister_to_Vietnam.
- [5] Naidu, G. V. C. “India–Vietnam Strategic Partnership in the Emerging Indo-Pacific Construct.” *India Quarterly*, vol. 77, no. 2, 2021, pp. 172–84.
- [6] Sarma, Sanghamitra. “India–Vietnam Relations through the Prism of the Indo-Pacific Concept.” *Strategic Analysis*, vol. 44, no. 4, 2020, pp. 360–77.
- [7] Nguyen Thi Oanh and Pham Thuy Nguyen. “Vietnam and India’s Approach to the Indo-Pacific Region: Implication for Bilateral Relation Promotion.” *Journal of Liberty and International Affairs*, vol. 6, no. 3, 2021, pp. 62–78, <https://e-jlia.com/index.php/jlia/article/view/236>.
- [8] Vo Minh Hung et al. “The India–Vietnam–China Geopolitical Triangle and Vietnam’s Measures to Navigate This Relationship from a Two-Level Game Theory Perspective.” *Multidisciplinary Reviews*, vol. 8, no. 3, 2025, article e2025079, <https://malque.pub/ojs/index.php/mr/article/view/5411>.
- [9] Nguyen Tuan Binh et al. “The Strategic Adjustments of China, India, and the US in the Indo-Pacific Geopolitical Context.” *Journal of Liberty and International Affairs*, vol. 10, no. 1, 2024, pp. 173–91, <https://e-jlia.com/index.php/jlia/article/view/1400>.
- [10] Nghiem Thi Thanh Thuy and Vu Le Thai Hoang. “International Experiences in Strategic Autonomy and Policy Implications for Vietnam.” *Communist Journal*, 27 Feb. 2024, <https://www.tapchicongsan.org.vn/web/guest/the-gioi-van-de-su-kien/-/2018/894702/kinh-nghiem-tu-chu-chien-luoc-cua-mot-so-quo-c-gia-tren-the-gioi-va-ham-y-chinh-sach-doi-voi-viet-nam.aspx>. In Vietnamese.
- [11] Nguyen Trong Thuong. “Strategic Autonomy and Enhancement of National Standing.” *Communist Journal*, 9 Nov. 2025, <https://www.tapchicongsan.org.vn/web/guest/quoc-phong-an-ninh-oi-ngoai1/-/2018/1167002/tu-chu-chien-luoc%2C-nang-cao-vi-the-quoc-gia.aspx>. In Vietnamese.
- [12] Galtung, Johan. “Violence, Peace, and Peace Research.” *Journal of Peace Research*, vol. 6, no. 3, 1969, pp. 167–91. *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/422690>.
- [13] Dinh Xuan Ly. “Drivers of Vietnam–India Relations from Historical and Contemporary Perspectives.” *Political Theory*, 26 Apr. 2017, <https://lyluanchinhtri.vn/nhung-dong-luc-phat-trien-quan-he-viet-nam-a-n-do-tu-lich-su-va-hien-dai-2455.html>. In Vietnamese.
- [14] Nehru, Jawaharlal. *India’s Foreign Policy: Selected Speeches, September 1946–April 1961*. Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, 1961.
- [15] Majumdar, R. C. *Ancient Indian Colonization in South-East Asia*. 2nd ed., B. J. Sandesara, 1963.
- [16] Le Thi Hang Nga and Huynh Thanh Loan. “Cultural Diplomacy and People-to-People Exchanges Connecting Vietnam and India.” *Communist Journal*, 2022, <https://tinyurl.com/3dm34fb4>. In Vietnamese.
- [17] Jyoti. “Cultural Diplomacy in India–Vietnam Relations: An Act East Policy Perspective.” *International Journal of Advanced Research and Multidisciplinary Trends*, vol. 3, no. 1, 2026, pp. 70–76, <https://ijarmt.com/index.php/j/article/view/664>.
- [18] Melissen, Jan, editor. *The New Public Diplomacy: Soft Power in International Relations*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.
- [19] Chaturvedy, Rajeev Ranjan. “India–Vietnam Ties, from Strong to Stronger.” *The Hindu*, 21 July 2022, <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/india-vietnam-ties-from-strong-to-stronger/article65663062.ece>.
- [20] Uyanaev, Sergey V. “India–Vietnam: Fifty Years on the Path of Interaction.” *The Russian Journal of Vietnamese Studies*, vol. 6, no. 4, 2022, pp. 13–22, <https://vietnamjournal.ru/2618-9453/article/view/117515>.

- [21] Kesavan, Krishnan V. "India's 'Act East' policy and regional cooperation." *India and South Korea: Exploring new avenues, outlining goals* 7 (2020).
- [22] Singh, Karan. "The Philosophy of Peace." *World Affairs: The Journal of International Issues*, vol. 6, no. 3, 2002, pp. 106–14. *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/45064914>.
- [23] Zhuravlev, Vitalii E. "The Philosophy of Peace." *Science. Culture. Society*, vol. 27, no. 3, 2021, pp. 85–93, <https://www.journal-scs.ru/index.php/scs/article/view/237>.
- [24] India. Ministry of External Affairs. *India–Vietnam Bilateral Relations*. Government of India, 2020.
- [25] India. Ministry of External Affairs. *Annual Report 2020–21*. Government of India, 2021, https://www.mea.gov.in/Uploads/PublicationDocs/33569_MEA_annual_Report.pdf.