

Vietnam - India Oil and Gas Cooperation: From “Strategic Partnership” To “Comprehensive Strategic Partnership”

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Abstract

Entering a new phase of the "Look East Policy": the "Act East" policy, the relationship between Vietnam and India has grown and developed in almost all fields. Based on a developing traditional relationship, upgraded to a comprehensive strategic partnership, Vietnam is an essential pillar in India's "Act East" policy in the Indo-Pacific context. With abundant resources, especially oil, and gas, the collaboration and investment between the two nations in this field have been increasingly strengthened and developed despite adverse reactions from China - a key challenge in the relationship between the two countries – especially in oil and gas exploration and production projects in the South China Sea. This article presents the results of cooperation between Vietnam and India in the oil and gas field in the context of China's rise and strong intervention.

Keywords: Vietnam, India, oil, gas, South China Sea

INTRODUCTION

Entering the 21st century, the Asia-Pacific region is home to the interests of many world powers. Among the emerging powers in Asia, India is the second phenomenon after China's development. The impressive growth of India, a typical and influential country in Asia, has been attracting the attention and cooperation of many countries, including Vietnam. Because the potentials and conditions of Vietnam and India are commensurate and complementary: Vietnam has vast mineral reserves and a stable and developed economy. Meanwhile, India has a rare abundant human capital, with a great demand for energy and resources. At the same time, India is also known as one of the countries with the largest economy in the world the world leader in science and technology, human resource development, and supply services. Strengthening the cooperation with India will help Vietnam's economy develop in many areas, contributing to the strength of Vietnam in its statements in the region. Developing good relations with India will be a safe step for Vietnam in the context of the complicated developments of the world. In addition, the close economic linkage of the two countries contributes not only to promoting the development of each country but also to transforming the Asia region into an “Arc of Advantage and Prosperity,” thereby promoting growth and stability and also allowing New Delhi with an opportunity to move beyond South Asia and build up its Look East Policy, thereby better placing itself to address emerging geo-political realities in the Indo-Pacific, including balancing the impact of China in the Asia region (Mullen & Prasad, 2013).

In Southeast Asia, the South China Sea is considered a sea, an essential geo-strategic area of the region and the world. It is a crucial canal in this area that used to go from the western Indian Ocean to East Asia. The island system and the security of the sea lanes (marine terrorism, piracy, marine ecosystems) are considered necessary because they are maritime routes. ASEAN nations, India, Taiwan, China, Japan, and South Korea rely significantly on it, as most of their important shipping routes pass through the South China Sea (Cordner, 1994). In addition, this sea is said to have significant oil and natural gas reserves and a rich fishing demand. Its geo-strategic, political and military position is becoming increasingly crucial for strong countries, reflected in the aspects of the influenced areas, opportunities for cooperation and development, and tools to control strategies. However, the South China Sea area also has sovereignty disputes, sovereign rights, and jurisdiction that have not been thoroughly resolved. Therefore, it has always been a hot spot for the region and the world, although occasionally tensions are at different levels (Nam, 2011).

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In Asia, China and India, two fast-growing economies worldwide, are scrambling to compete for energy in different areas to serve their growth and development. The competition between these two powers is evident in Southeast Asia, directly in the South China Sea. For India, the South China Sea has strategic significance from a geo-strategic and geo-economic perspective in the context of growing strategic competition with China. In this area, India has a positive relationship with Vietnam - a country with total sovereignty over the Hoang Sa and Truong Sa archipelagoes and related waters. Besides the traditional fields, cooperation between Vietnam and India in oil and gas took place relatively early. It is increasingly developing based on the joint development of the two countries' relations, from a "strategic partnership" (2007) to a "comprehensive strategic partnership" (2016). From a strategic perspective, maintaining cooperation in the oil and gas field with Vietnam helps India maintain its strategic presence in the South China Sea area and, at the same time, helps the country access and exploit abundant energy resources in the critical sea of the world to serve the current development of India. One of the most significant drivers of deepening the strategic partnership between India and Vietnam is the shared apprehension of an aggressive China whose assertiveness is growing. Its growth is reflected in strengthening weapons systems, including anti-aircraft and missile defense systems, on artificial islands it has built in the South China Sea.

METHODS

The article employs various research methodologies, including historical research methods, to examine the evolution of oil and gas cooperation between the two countries in the first two decades of the 21st century. Concurrently, logical methodology is also emphasized and applied to simultaneously evaluate different historical stages and aspects over time. In scrutinizing the issue, the author focuses on the logical progression of characteristic events and specific developments in the process of promoting Vietnam-India oil and gas cooperation. Additionally, the article employs scientific methods such as analysis, statistics, synthesis, and comparison to describe current data, statistics within specific spatial and temporal contexts, thereby highlighting the research problem and enhancing the scientific rigor of the topic.

LITERATURE REVIEW

During the research process, we observed that there are numerous directly and indirectly relevant sources published on the subject, which have assisted us in conducting a more comprehensive study on the oil and gas cooperation between Vietnam and India.

In presenting India's perspective on the bilateral relationship, Vijay Sakhuja (2011) focuses on delineating the areas and content of cooperation between the two countries following the establishment of a strategic partnership, framed within the context of India's relationship with ASEAN. As per Prime Minister A.B. Vajpayee's assessment, the joint oil and gas cooperation venture between India and Vietnam stands as one of the earliest and most successful overseas ventures for India. Both Rani D Mullen and Kailash K Prasad (2013) and Harsh V. Pant (2018) contend that the promotion and enhancement of collaboration between India and Vietnam across multiple sectors in the first decade of the 21st century have yielded significant achievements. India consistently allocates substantial investments in Vietnam, particularly in the oil and gas sector. Vietnam's invitation to Indian partners to collaborate in oil and gas exploration and exploitation activities within its 200-nautical-mile Exclusive Economic Zone in the South China Sea demonstrates the high regard both countries have for their strategic cooperation (Garima Gairola and Anna Nath Ganguly, 2021). This positions India to play a greater role and expand beyond South Asia to pursue an Eastward policy and balance China's influence in Asia, leading Pankaj Jha (2008) to argue that India must proactively broaden cooperation with Vietnam in other potential areas to further strengthen this relationship. Girijesh Pant (2008) argued in his book that energy plays a crucial role in maintaining global strategic balance, and the global energy market is undergoing changes. India is seeking to promote energy cooperation with countries amid globalization to safeguard its energy interests. P.V. Rao (2008) argued that in the context of the Asia-Pacific region becoming a focal point with the involvement of major powers, India cannot overlook cooperation with ASEAN countries. Vietnam is also one of India's key partners in investment and oil exploration. In the book "The History of Vietnam's Oil and Gas Industry (up to 2010)" by the Vietnam Oil and Gas Group, geological research, exploration, and exploitation activities of Vietnam's oil and gas resources from before the August Revolution in 1945 until the

end of 2010 have been essential. According to Tridib Chakraborti (2018), despite China's increasing role and influence in the South China Sea to strategically compete with India, the oil and gas cooperation between Vietnam and India continues to yield significant results, integrating India's presence in joint oil exploration ventures with Vietnam in the South China Sea region. Daijiworld Residency (2011) also states that India's cooperation with Vietnam, or any other country, complies with international regulations.

Basis For Oil and Gas Cooperation Between Vietnam and India in The New International Context

The traditional relationship between Vietnam and India has existed for thousands of years, originating from cultural and religious exchanges. The two sides officially established diplomatic relations on January 7, 1972. Over the decades, good traditions and mutual trust have been a solid foundation for this relationship to grow from "comprehensive cooperation" (2003) to "strategic partnership" (2007), which developed into the status of "comprehensive strategic partnership" (2016), marking a new development of the bilateral relationship and expanding it to all necessary fields of the two countries demonstrating mutual trust and understanding as well as help and support each other in regional international affairs. In the economic field, India is one of the countries having many considerable investment projects in Vietnam, in which oil and gas is the most focused field, a bright spot in the investment relationship between the two countries with many projects worth billions of dollars to deploy or explore oil fields in Vietnam.

Vietnam is a maritime country, having an important geopolitical and geo-economic position when located in the South China Sea area - a specific area containing relevant factors such as maritime, archipelagic country, sea areas under national jurisdiction, countries without sea or geographically disadvantaged, historic waters, fishing areas, safety of navigation, search and rescue... (Thao, 2008: 20). Most of the maritime routes pass the sea under the national jurisdiction of Vietnam. V's sea and coastal areas are on the leading marine and aviation route between the Indian and Pacific oceans, Europe, the Middle East, China, Japan and other countries. In addition, with rich and diverse resources, oil and gas are considered key resources among Vietnam's marine resources, contributing to the growth of Vietnam's economy, especially in the cause of industrialization and modernization of the country today.

Over 90% of the world's commercial transport is through sea routes, and 45% must go through the South China Sea. The amount of oil and liquefied petroleum gas transported through this sea is 15 times greater than the volume transported through the Panama Canal (Mỹ, 2007: 29). Therefore, it has a vital geopolitical and economic position for countries inside and outside the region. In addition, it is also considered one of the five most significant oil and gas basins in the world, containing about 10 billion tons of oil equivalent and 1,000 billion cubic meters of natural gas, not to mention the amount of flammable ice (freezing gas) comparable to the oil above and gas reserves being studied and exploited (Tiến, 2011: 26). South offshore reserves account for about 25% of the oil reserves at the bottom of the South China Sea; nearly 20 million tons can be exploited annually; Oil and gas reserves in the continental shelf are estimated at approximately 10 billion tons (Sông Lam & Thái Quỳnh, 2012: 187).

Vietnam has many large sedimentary basins containing oil and gas on the continental shelf, including Hoang Sa and Truong Sa, where Cuu Long is the basin with the largest reserves. Vietnam's sea area has rich resources, especially oil and gas, playing an essential role in the country's development. Our Party has commented: "*The sea and coastal areas are strategic areas for economic and national security, have many advantages for development, and are the great opening doors of the whole country to promote international exchanges, collect revenue and increase profits, attract foreign investment.*" (Đảng Cộng sản Việt Nam, 1996: 211). Vietnam's oil and gas sources have been explored and surveyed with potential reserves of over 4 billion cubic meters of oil equivalent, and recently expanded the search and discovered several new fields. In 5 years (2006-2010), there were 12 new oil and gas discoveries, increasing oil and gas reserves to 333 million tons of oil equivalent; in 2010 alone, there were seven new oil and gas discoveries, increasing reserves to 43 million tons of oil equivalents. Therefore, with estimated crude oil reserves of 4.4 billion barrels, Vietnam is the second largest country in East Asia in terms of oil reserves, just behind China (Phương Anh, 2013).

Meanwhile, with the second largest population in the world, India is an energy-intensive country with a per capita level of one-third of the world's average energy consumption. The population burden has placed India in the ranks of countries with the 6th highest energy consumption and import demand globally (Das, Mathur, Richter, 2005: 18). Therefore, it is particularly interested in national energy issues. According to Tata Energy Research Institute (TERI) calculations, in 2011, India consumed about 150 million tons, needing to import 1.5 million BPD. In the next 20 years, more oil and gas will be required to supply cars and families' daily needs. By 2030, 90% of India's oil and gas will come from abroad (Thông tấn xã Việt Nam, 2013: 18). The lack of energy is the main reason that pushes that country to expand cooperation and find resources in the world in its policy. India's oil and gas explorations and extractions in Myanmar and Vietnam must be understood in this respect. Therefore, there is no way that India would retreat from the South China Sea just because China or any other country has taken an exception to its economic and naval activities in this region) (Muni, 2011).

Southeast Asia in general, or the South China Sea region in particular, is an option that is both historical and more feasible than the remaining options when a series of continental and island countries have a close relationship with India. With high political stability, increasing economic growth rate along with its strategic position as both a neighbor of China and located parallel to significant routes in Asia as well as acting as a strategic link in India's Act East policy, Vietnam has become an essential spearhead in advancing the political, economic and security interests of India in Southeast Asia. Besides, with the abundant oil and gas resources, the South China Sea and Vietnam have become India's top concern in diversifying energy sources. This country has been conducting oil and gas exploration and production activities in our country since the 80s of the twentieth century.

With the advantages above, cooperation in oil and gas exploitation in areas under Vietnam's sovereignty in the South China Sea has ensured India's energy security based on a strategic partnership between the two countries.

The First Pages of History of Vietnam - India Oil and Gas Cooperation

India was one of the earliest countries to invest in Vietnam after 1975. During 1976-1986, while Vietnam was still under economic embargo by the US and pro-US forces, India continued to increase investment in this country, especially in oil and gas exploration and production activities. In December 1978, Minister in Charge of Petroleum Dinh Duc Thien officially visited India. The two sides exchanged the possibility of India consulting and providing technical assistance, purchasing several spare parts and equipment, participating in the construction of a part of an oil refinery, exploring the Gulf of Tonkin, the continental shelf, and processing data, training skilled workers (Tập đoàn dầu khí Việt Nam, 2011: 333). Due to various reasons, oil and gas exploration and production activities between Vietnam and India have not been officially implemented. After the 6th Party Congress (December 1986), Petrovietnam Company began to contact world oil and gas companies of countries outside the Soviet Union. To avoid the reaction of the Soviet Union and expand international relations with the "South-South cooperation", India is the country chosen by the leaders of the Party and the Government of Vietnam as a breakthrough. On that basis, the Secretariat (Communist Party of Vietnam) requested the General Department of Petroleum to implement Directive No. 04-CT/TW dated March 9, 1987, on cooperation between Vietnam and India in many aspects, especially oil and gas.

In 1987, based on the "South-South cooperation" policy, the Council of Ministers directed the General Department of Petroleum to negotiate a contract for the product division of blocks 06, 19, and 12E on the southern continental shelf with the National Oil and Gas Company of India (ONGC - Oil and Natural Gas Corporation). In December 1987, the Law on Foreign Investment in Vietnam was promulgated, and Petrovietnam was allowed to sign two oil and gas production sharing contracts with Indian companies. On May 19, 1988, the leadership of the Party and the Council of Ministers of Vietnam allowed the General Department of Petroleum, represented by Petrovietnam, to sign a Product Sharing Contract (PSC) with the National Oil and Gas Company of India (ONGC) in blocks 06, 19 and 12E belong to Nam Con Son sedimentary basin with an area of 14,000 km² (Tập đoàn dầu khí Việt Nam, 2011, 204) (Pant, 2008: 70). Under the contract, ONGC is granted a license to explore oil and gas in Vietnam's southern continental shelf, contributing to meeting about 50% of Vietnam's gas demand. From March to September 1989, ONGC Videsh Limited (OVL) used MV Sagar Sandhani to explode 6,400 km of 2D seismic route to add to the existing network. After processing and interpreting this document, the results have detected four structures, 6A, 6B, 6C and 6D, in Lot 06; 2 structures

19A, and 19B in Lot 19; continue to confirm the structures in Lot 12E. ONGC-VL's activities at contract lots just stopped at the seismic survey, then they wanted to find more partners to join to share risks (Tập đoàn dầu khí Việt Nam, 2011: 307). OVL invited British Petroleum (BP - UK) as a partner to conduct oil and gas exploration on the southern continental shelf of Vietnam (Indian Petroleum Directory, 2005: 93).

After the end of the Cold War (1991), Vietnam and India entered a new stage of development associated with the two countries' economic reform and innovation process. Cooperation in the oil and gas field between the two countries has been maintained and achieved many positive results. In 1992 and 1993, OVL Company had a significant breakthrough in cooperation with PetroVietnam, which discovered two large free gas fields, Lan Tay and Lan Do. The first exploration well was ignited at Block 06 in the Lan Do structure on April 11, 1991, but gas could not be exploited. Drilling for the second well started on December 13, 1992, and there was gas flow. On that basis, OVL, BP, and Petro Vietnam discovered dry gas reserves and started production in 2000 at both fields in Block 06 (Jha, 2008: 1099). Two gas fields are estimated to have about 58 billion cubic meters and can produce about 3 billion cubic meters yearly (Pant, 2008: 70) (Subramanian, 2003). The discovery of these two gas fields laid the foundation for the first foreign-invested gas production project in Vietnam. Oil and gas exploration and production activities between Vietnam and India continue to be promoted in association with the development of bilateral relations between the two countries. India's oil resources in Vietnam were the nation's greatest overseas energy asset by 2001. ONGC then held a 45% stake in a joint venture with Petro-Vietnam and British Petroleum Corporation (BP).

Vietnamese President Tran Duc Luong visited India for business in December 1999, contributing to forming a new relationship framework for Vietnam-India relations. In January 2001, Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee paid an official visit to Vietnam, participating in promoting the signing of an oil and gas exploration and production contract between OVL and Petro Vietnam in the Nam Con Son area with a total investment capital of 238 million USD (Chopra, 2006: 285) (Rao, 2008: 85). On January 9, 2001, PetroVietnam Investment & Development Company (PIDC) and OVL India signed a Memorandum of Understanding on collaboration in the exploration and production of hydrocarbons in Vietnam with the participation of the two countries' leaders. According to Prime Minister A.B. Vajpayee, the oil and gas cooperation joint venture between two countries is one of India's earliest and most successful joint ventures abroad (Lý, 2002: 324-325). In that spirit, India still advocates cooperation with Vietnam in oil and gas exploration and production in the South China Sea. In the early 2000s, China objected to India's role in this joint venture. However, India has asserted the right of its state-owned company to carry out the project as part of its legitimate economic interests (Minh, 2018). In November 2002, gas began to be exploited in the Nam Con Son basin of Vietnam (Ministry of External Affairs, 2007, 34), marking the success of the cooperation between Vietnam and India in oil and gas.

In May 2003, the General Secretary of the Communist Party of Vietnam, Nong Duc Manh, paid an official visit to India, marking a new milestone in the relationship between the two countries. The leaders of the two countries issued a Joint Declaration on the Framework of Comprehensive Cooperation between the Republic of India and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam as they entered the 21st Century, which affirmed, "Entering the 21st Century, the two Parties are resolved to bring into full play this traditional and friendly relationship and raise their cooperation to new heights to meet the new challenges posed by globalization, the menace of international terrorism and the significant challenges to the international system. Both sides endeavor to develop a strategic dimension to their partnership for the mutual benefit of their peoples, and to contribute to peace, stability, cooperation and prosperity in the Asia-Pacific region and the world at large." (Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 2003). This is the first joint statement on comprehensive cooperation between Vietnam and a country signed at the beginning of the 21st century, in which joint venture and investment proposals in oil and gas, coal and energy are of particular interest.

On that basis, Vietnam actively strengthens dialogue activities with Indian oil and gas companies and with the Government of India to promote the construction of oil refineries in Vietnam and participate in bidding to import crude oil from Vietnam. Accordingly, OVL succeeded in global bidding for an offshore exploration project in Vietnam in 2004 (Jha, 2008: 1094). In 2005, OVL won a 45% stake in the Vietnamese production block 6.1. 7.5 million standard cubic meters of gas daily (Scott, 2009: 122). Until June 2006, OVL continued to

be allowed to explore oil and gas in two blocks, 127 and 128, offshore Khanh Hoa. The contract between OVL and PetroVietnam is periodically updated at the request of both parties based on actual results. However, India's cooperation with Vietnam in the oil and gas field is considered an act against its territorial claims in the South China Sea by China. Production sharing contracts for blocks 127 and 128 between OVL and Vietnam were denounced as illegal by China in 2007 (Airy, 2007). This prompted India to angrily remark "This statement by China is a direct attack against India's pursuit of energy security"; a threat in which "China is bullying countries like India... It's time for India to assert itself" (Jha, 2007).

Oil And Gas Cooperation Between Vietnam and India Within the Framework Of "Strategic Partnership" (2007-2016)

In July 2007, Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung official visited India. Through this trip, both countries decided to upgrade their relations to the "Strategic Partnership" level. This is an event of great significance, marking a breakthrough in the relations between the two countries, paving the way for the extensive and diversified development of bilateral cooperation in the fields of politics and economy, culture, education, security, national defense, science and technology... for the sustainable development and prosperity of the two countries, contributing to peace, stability, cooperation, development, and prosperity of the Asia-Pacific region and the world. It can be said that the development of the two countries' relationship to the level of a "strategic partnership" has contributed to strengthening trust and continuing to promote the existing cooperation contents between the two countries in the energy and gas fields.

After the two countries developed the relationship to the "strategic partnership" level, economic cooperation, including cooperation in oil and gas, has been increasingly promoted. However, during the exploration, OVL did not find hydrocarbons in block 127, and the exploration process encountered many difficulties due to the area's natural conditions. OVL decided to abandon block 127, focusing on exploration activities in block 128. The OVL's efforts for a well in Block 128 were also unsuccessful due to logistical constraints in mooring the rig on a hard seabed (Das, 2018). Facing that fact, the OVL side intended to withdraw from these blocks of Vietnam. However, the Vietnamese side convinced OVL to extend the exploration time. Although no hydrocarbon sources were found in blocks 127 and 128, OVL continued investing in Vietnam's oil and gas exploration activities to maintain India's strategic interests in the South China Sea area.

By 2008, phases one and two of the OVL project in Vietnam was developed. OVL decided to spend \$34 million in phases two and three of exploration for both blocks, more than the investment committed for the first phase. OVL conducted exploration drilling on both blocks 127 and 128 (Nadkarni, 2008). OVL requested the Vietnamese side to extend the exploration period to June 2014 (Das, 2018). In addition, OVL also influenced relevant agencies in India to support OVL in boosting investment in exploration activities for oil and gas potential areas in the southern continental shelf of Vietnam. On that basis, in October 2009, India's Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs (CCEA) approved a \$149.46 million investment plan by (OVL) to further develop its gas field project in Vietnam (The Hindu, 2009). Phase three of the project is expected to intensify further, including drilling two development wells, undersea completion, and tying the wells through a standard pipeline.

Since 2009, after publishing the Tongue Line (nine-dash line) map, China has launched a diplomatic attack against partners cooperating with Vietnam in oil and gas exploration and production. Under pressure from China, plus current difficulties, BP has decided to transfer oil exploration and production in the southern continental shelf of Vietnam to its Indian counterpart. Facing that situation, the Government of Vietnam has approved the joint venture OVL and Petro Vietnam to buy back shares of BP. BP announced the cessation of exploration activities on the large-scale natural gas project in the Nam Con Son Basin in March 2009 in response to pressure from China (The Hanoist, 2010). In October 2010, Indian Oil and Gas Minister Murli Deora agreed to buy BP's 35% stake in the \$1.3 billion Nam Con Son gas project, thereby integrating the Indian presence in the region. The degree in oil and gas exploration joint venture with Vietnam in the South China Sea Area is already facing a reaction from China (Chakraborti, 2018: 15). This action shows that India is still determined to maintain cooperation in oil and gas exploration and production with Vietnam amid China's threat. In that context, China tries to entice Vietnamese oil and gas companies to participate in joint exploration with Chinese

partners to openly compete with partners from India (Jha, 2008).

Besides OVL, several other Indian companies such as International Manpower Resources, Larsen and Turbo Ltd, Thermax Babcock and Wilcox, Ion Exchange... also look forward to cooperating with Vietnam in providing technical, management, and expert services, equipment for the oil and gas industry. In March 2010, Essar Exploration & Production Ltd (India) signed a Petroleum Product Sharing Agreement (PSA) with Vietnam, granting a license to explore block 114 tanks. Red River. In the fields of oil and gas processing, petrochemicals and services, many Indian companies (such as Larsen and Turbo., Ltd) have provided many critical equipment for the projects of Phu My Fertilizer Plant (Ba Ria - Vung Tau), Dung Quat Oil Refinery (Quang Ngai).

In September 2011, Indian Foreign Minister SM Krishna paid an official visit to Vietnam within the framework of the 14th Vietnam-India Joint Committee Meeting (JCM) on Cooperation in Trade, Economy, Science and Technology. During this meeting, both countries expressed satisfaction over the consultation of the developing Strategic Partnership initiatives. They agreed to add broader content to bilateral relations in defense, security, trade and investment, education, culture, and other areas. Foreign Minister SM Krishna affirmed that India's OVL would continue to cooperate with Vietnam to exploit oil and gas in the South China Sea despite the objections of the Chinese side. As a result, SM Krishna told his Vietnamese counterpart Pham Binh Minh, during a meeting on September 16, 2011, that OVL would conduct oil and gas exploration in two offshore blocks (blocks 127 and 128) that Vietnam claims sovereignty and has been fully confirmed officially. New Delhi denied China's objection to ONGC's 17 oil exploration projects in two blocks (127 and 128) of Vietnam in the South China Sea and thus dismissed the threat from North Korea.

Before China's reactions, India affirmed that its cooperation with Vietnam in the oil and gas field "is by international regulations". Ahead of the visit to Vietnam by Foreign Minister S.M. Krishna, Vishnu Prakash, a spokesman for the Indian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in an interview in response to questions from reporters, resolutely reiterated New Delhi's position on the matter and said: "The Our cooperation with Vietnam or any other country always follows international laws, standards and conventions. Trade is an important aspect of India's relationship with Vietnam. The energy, hydrocarbon and renewable energy sectors are key. We would like to see this relationship grow and expand. China's objection to OVL's exploration activities in the South China Sea has no legal basis because these blocks belong to Vietnam" (Daijiworld Residency, 2011). He also clearly pointed out that India has an investment of \$400 million in Vietnam's hydrocarbon sectors, of which its OVL has an investment of \$225 million for oil and gas exploration projects in the South China Sea, some of which were opposed by China, who said: "India supports freedom of navigation in the South China Sea and hopes that all claimants will abide by the 2002 Declaration of Conduct in the South China Sea." (Jacob & Patil, 2011).

Before India's determination, the Chinese side stepped up pressure along with direct threats to OVL company's exploration and production activities in the South China Sea. A Chinese daily newspaper, published on September 18, 2011, wrote, "India and Vietnam are determined to jointly explore oil resources in the disputed waters of the South China Sea, which could risk triggering a new round of tensions in the already tense waters. Both countries should understand that China will not back down regarding issues related to territorial integrity. Beijing resolutely defends its indisputable sovereignty in the South China Sea. They must understand the sensitive and complex nature of the South China Sea issue, exercise restraint, and refrain from reckless moves that could escalate tensions in the disputed waters. Their plan to explore oil and gas in the waters is not simply an economic matter but one of political and security importance. Any misstep or misjudgment by them could damage their relationship with China. Therefore, the daily warned that jumping in to provoke China regarding maritime disputes is not a reasonable move for New Delhi," (Chakraborti, 2018: 15).

In October 2011, Vietnamese President Truong Tan Sang official visited to India, further strengthening the strategic partnership between India and Vietnam. On October 12, 2011, Vietnamese President Truong Tan Sang discussed with Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in New Delhi. The two sides pledged to maintain peace and security in the South China Sea and expand the agreement's contents in partnership relationships. India's growing engagement with Vietnam, and its expansion in the South China Sea, can be seen as a logical

extension of its Look East Policy (LEP). On the occasion of the visit of the President of Vietnam, the National Oil and Gas Group of India (ONGC) and the Vietnam Oil and Gas Group (PV) signed a cooperation agreement in oil and gas exploration and production. This framework agreement, including a deal on oil and gas exploration signed between ONGC and PV and valid for three years, promotes long-term cooperation in the oil and gas field, which the two countries have agreed. The agreement was established in 1988. This agreement aims to encourage and exchange visits of leaders of the two sides as well as investment and expansion of oil and gas exploitation activities, including oil refining, transportation and, supply of oil and gas between the two countries as well as between Vietnam, India, and a third country (Elizabeth, 2011). The agreement says the two nations will cooperate on “various fronts in the oil and gas sector - in upstream activities, in refining, in gas processing in Vietnam, in India and third countries,” said DK Sarraf, managing director of the Indian government-run ONGC Videsh Ltd (OVL) (Roche, 2011). Thus, by signing of an agreement in oil and gas cooperation with Vietnam in October 2011, India aimed to expand and promote oil exploration activities in the South China Sea. It defended its decision, despite China challenging the legitimacy of India's presence.

After asking “outside of the region” countries to stay away from the South China Sea, China sent a diplomatic note to India in November 2011, stressing that the exploration of blocks 127 and 128 must be approved by permission from Beijing. Without this permission, OVL activities will be considered illegal. Meanwhile, Vietnam has emphasized the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea to affirm its sovereignty over the two explored blocks. India has decided to go along with Vietnam's claims and ignore China's objections. Maintaining this policy is seen as New Delhi's attempt to assert India's presence in the area where China has shown aggression (ET Bureau, 2018). It can be noticed that India, which often prefers to stay on the sidelines and avoid taking sides with anyone, seems to be realizing that it cannot maintain a luxurious attitude of looking at it with its arms crossed if it wants to preserve its prestige as a political leader as a significant player in both East and Southeast Asia. By supporting Hanoi's claims and accepting the Vietnamese invitation to explore the two blocks, India expressed its desire to deepen its friendship with Vietnam. It ignored China's warning to stay away (Pant, 2018: 6).

India is still undeterred by China's objections and continues to sign an agreement with Vietnam to promote oil and gas exploration in the South China Sea. Vietnam and India have rejected China's claims in this sea. At a strategic level, it is clear that India's growing relationship with Vietnam is expected to be disrupted in various ways in the region. In a sense, India's relationship with regional states like Vietnam is being viewed through the prism of tensions emerging in the disputed waters of the South China Sea (Majumdar, 2013: 246). Since 2012, OVL has started to promote exploration and exploitation activities of block 06.1 projects including two natural gas fields Lan Tay and Lan Do. OVL participates in 45% of the investment capital in the joint venture to exploit gas at the Lan Tay field, with the output from 2002 to the end of 2012 of more than 37 billion m³ of gas and 13 million barrels of condensate. Lan Do mine has been officially operated since October 2012 (Tùng, 2014).

To assert its sovereignty in the disputed waters, in June 2012, the state-owned China National Offshore Oil Corporation (CNOOC) opened the tender for exploration activities for nine blocks in waters also claimed by Vietnam. Oil block 128, which Vietnam argues is in its 200-nautical-mile Exclusive Economic Zone under the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, is part of nine blocks invited by CNOOC to bid on a global scale. By procuring an international bid for a block of Vietnamese oil, which an Indian oil company is exploring, China has put India in a difficult position. However, India continues cooperating with Vietnam in exploration and exploitation activities in block 128 of Vietnam. India's lack of threat from China's maneuvers was evident during the 2012 ASEAN Regional Forum in Phnom Penh (Cambodia). At this forum, India made a strong argument in favor of not only freedom of navigation, but also the right to access resources by the principles of international law. Despite the political signaling, even the Indian Navy, which has been concise in other cases, is committed to protecting India's commercial interests in the South China Sea (Pant, 2018). In response to China's reaction, India decided to strengthen cooperation with Vietnam in the region and continue oil and gas exploration and production activities in the South China Sea (Pant, 2013: 454).

In November 2013, the General Secretary of the Communist Party of Vietnam, Nguyen Phu Trong, officially visited India. Through this visit, General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong expressed his desire to continue strengthening Vietnam-India cooperation in the fields of energy, oil and gas exploration and production,

inviting Indian businesses to participate in the investment in joint venture exploration and exploitation in several blocks off the coast of Vietnam. The Indian Government responded by expressing its determination to carry out cooperation plans with Vietnam oil and gas exploration and production in Vietnam's exclusive economic zone in the South China Sea. They believe this is as a significant area of cooperation between the two nations and hope it will be further strengthened. On the occasion of the visit to India by General Secretary of the Communist Party of Vietnam Nguyen Phu Trong, PV, and OVL signed a Memorandum of Understanding on cooperation in the field of oil and gas exploration and production in blocks on the continental shelf of two countries as well as in third countries. The Indian side also views this as a significant cooperative effort to further economic growth between the two nations, and it declared that it would keep conducting oil and gas exploration and production operations in Vietnam's exclusive economic zone in the South China Sea. Regarding trade, India is one of the export markets for petroleum products and petroleum-based by-products to Vietnam as raw materials for domestic production, although the volume is still tiny. In 2013, Vietnam imported over 130 million USD of plastic materials from India, over 44 million USD of other petroleum products (Tùng, 2016). India's economic interest in the South China Sea is related to OVL's right to explore oil and gas resources. As a result, China's growing assertiveness forces India to uphold and protect its interests in the region (Baruah, 2013).

By signing agreements for oil and gas exploration, the countries continue to further their collaboration in light of their accomplishments. In September 2014, Vietnam requested India to conduct oil and gas exploration in fresh offshore Vietnam blocks through seven agreements signed by both countries during the visit of the president of India, Pranab Mukherjee. India's need to diversify its energy sources and end its dependence on Middle East oil has led it to identify the need to ensure freedom of navigation in the Pacific, the region, and the Pacific Ocean. The area will become increasingly important to India regarding transportation and supply (Jha, 2014). The cooperation between two countries in the oil and gas field opens a new era of deeper collaboration with Vietnam and relevant Asia Pacific countries (mainly the United States and Japan) in the context of India upgrading its 25-year-old appearance (Granados, 2018: 123). Following that, Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung's visit to India in October 2014 also contributed to consolidating and strengthening cooperation in the fields of oil, gas and energy between the two countries, marked by the signing ceremony of the Cooperation Agreement between OVL and PetroVietnam on new oil and gas exploration projects in Vietnam. Specifically, for activities in Vietnam, the two sides also exchanged and reached a high consensus on cooperation in exploring of blocks 102/10 and 106/10 of PVEP and block 128 of ONGC Videsh offshore. In particular, one of the essential contents agreed upon by the two sides is the cooperation exploring of NELP blocks by ONGC in the Andaman and Cauvery basins – India (Năng lượng Việt Nam, 2014). According to statistics, Vietnam consumed nearly a quarter of OVL's oil and gas output, including 5.5 million tons of oil and 3.3 billion cubic meters of gas in the period 2014-2015 (Năng lượng Việt Nam, 2016).

At the end of March 2015, the delegation of Vietnam Oil and Gas Group led by Mr. Dinh Van Son had a business trip to India to attend the Energy Security Conference on the 50th anniversary of the establishment of the Indian Petroleum Company, ONGC Videsh Ltd (OVL), and work with Indian partners on cooperation opportunities in the oil and gas sector. In India, the delegation of the Vietnam Oil and Gas Group worked with leaders of the Indian Oil Company (IOC) (March 26) and OVL (March 28). During the working sessions, the two sides focused on discussing cooperation opportunities for upstream and downstream projects of the two sides, especially the project of producing Condensate Cai Mep and LAB (Linear Alkyl Benzene) of Vietnam Oil and Gas Group, as well as the subsequent implementation of special oil and gas contracts related to blocks 102/10 and 106 /10 and block 128 offshore Vietnam. During the working sessions, Mr. Dinh Van Son affirmed that the Vietnam Oil and Gas Group always considers Indian partners, including ONGC, as strategic partners and expressed the desire for ONGC to participate more in the oil and gas projects in the continental shelf of Vietnam (Năng lượng Việt Nam, 2015).

On May 25, 2015, Indian Deputy Foreign Minister Anil Wadhwa, during his visit to Vietnam, clearly affirmed that India considers Vietnam an essential pillar in India's "Act East Policy". At the same time, India also supports the typical stance of Vietnam and ASEAN on the South China Sea issue. India will continue cooperating in oil and gas exploration and production in Vietnam's waters (Binh Giang, 2015). In May 2015,

ONGC submitted an application to the Vietnamese side for permission to extend the oil and gas exploration period for another year at Block 128 and was approved by the Vietnamese side. ONGC also received the support of the Government of India for the maintenance of this project. By 2015, ONGC had invested 50.88 million USD in lot 128, holding 100% of the shares (Thu An, 2015). In July 2017, ONGC was extended by the Vietnamese side for two more years to explore the oil and gas block in the waters on the southern continental shelf of Vietnam. This is the fifth extension of OVL to explore batch 128, and this license is valid until June 2019.

Vietnam - India Oil and Gas Cooperation Within the Framework Of “Comprehensive Strategic Partnership” (2016-2020)

In December 2016, National Assembly Chairwoman Nguyen Thi Kim Ngan visited India. During a meeting with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi on December 9, 2016, National Assembly Chairwoman Nguyen Thi Kim Ngan affirmed that Vietnam always supports and encourages Indian oil and gas companies to invest in, explore, and exploit oil and gas in open oil and gas blocks in the continental shelf of Vietnam; At the same time, he proposed Indian partners to introduce and create conditions for Vietnam Oil and Gas Group to participate in cooperation in potential oil and gas projects in India and third countries (Southeast Asia, Latin America, Middle East, North Africa, Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS)). Indian Prime Minister Modi highly appreciated the achievements achieved between the two countries in the past. He said Indian investors are very impressed with the investment environment in Vietnam and affirmed that the Indian Government supports Indian investors coming to Vietnam for production and business. During her visit to India, National Assembly Chairwoman Nguyen Thi Kim Ngan also received Mr. Dinesh Kumar Sarraf - Chairman and CEO of Petrochemical Corporation of India, and Mr. Narendra Kumar Verma - President and Director of OVL.

On December 10, 2016, it officially invited Indian partners to cooperate with Vietnam in oil and gas exploration and production activities within its 200-nautical mile Exclusive Economic Zone in the South China Sea. The fact that Vietnam extended its invitation to explore the region into such situations and times for India demonstrates that the two countries value each other's strategic cooperation (Gairola & Ganguly, 2021: 129). By 2016, ONGC/OVL carried out oil exploration and production activities according to the contracts signed in blocks 06-1 and 128. Besides, ONGC and Vietnamese partners actively engaged in development activities, such as orchid mining, to put it into operation by the end of 2018³. By the end of 2016, oil and gas production at two fields, Lan Tay and Lan Do was estimated to be 51.89 billion cubic meters of gas and 19.72 million barrels of condensate. In 2016 alone, production is estimated at 3.19 billion cubic meters of gas and 0.64 million barrels of condensate (Tiến Đạt, 2016).

To promote its energy exploration activities in the South China Sea, on March 3, 2018, on the occasion of the visit to India by Vietnamese President Tran Dai Quang, India signed agreements with Vietnam in the petroleum sector. In a joint statement, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Vietnamese President Tran Dai Quang pledged to expand the India-Vietnam Partnership in defense and energy. The high-level meeting also reflected the two countries' concerns about China's aggression towards India's growing energy cooperation with Vietnam (Sharma, 2019: 298). Vietnam has become essential in India's energy exploration strategy in the South China Sea. On that basis, the two countries continued to promote bilateral investment between PV and ONGC by signing of a Joint Statement on the occasion of the visit to Vietnam by the President of the Republic of India, Ram Nath Kovind, from November 18 to 20, 2018. Accordingly, the two sides will continue to explore and exploit oil and gas on the mainland, continental shelf, and exclusive economic zone of Vietnam. Especially in the joint statement issued during Indian President Ram Nath Kovind's visit to Vietnam in 2018, India and Vietnam first identified cooperation models involving third countries in the following areas: their oil and gas cooperation project (Ministry of External Affairs, 2018). It is a necessary development, contributing to expanding cooperation between Vietnam and India in the oil and gas field.

Until 2018, ONGC/OVL continued oil and gas activities in Vietnam under the contract at block 06-1, block

³ The Phong Lan Dai gas field was discovered in 2016. The Phong Lan Dai field development plan was approved by the Ministry of Industry and Trade of Vietnam on January 3, 2017. Gas and condensate from Phong Lan Dai field will be connected to Nam Con Son pipeline to Dinh Co Gas Processing Plant and transferred to Phu My Gas - Electricity - Fertilizer Complex.

128 offshore Vietnam, in which OVL actively cooperates with partners in Vietnam to deploy activities for the Phong Lan Dai field. According to the assessment, in the contracts with the Vietnamese side, block 06-1, with the cooperation of ONGC/OVL (45% capital), Rosneft (35%), and Rosneft Vietnam BV (20% capital), have an excellent exploitation result in Lan Tay, Lan Do, and Orchid Wild. Meanwhile, block 128, although actively explored, has not yet achieved many results. Therefore, in September 2019, OVL applied for a two-year extension for oil and gas exploration activities at block B-128 in the South China Sea under Vietnam's sovereignty, where the license expired on 15/02. 6/2019 (Press Trust of India, 2019). Block 128 is located in an area that China also claims. Beijing has objected to OVL's oil and gas exploration activities off the coast of Vietnam, saying they are illegal activities infringing on China's sovereignty. Still, the Indian company continues to explore oil and gas in this block. Although no hydrocarbons have been found in block 128, OVL will continue to operate its strategic and diplomatic interests in the region. Indian Ambassador to Vietnam Pranay Verma, in an interview, affirmed that "The energy cooperation between India and Vietnam is a long-term partnership, based on long-term investment. This partnership is mutually beneficial and important to India's energy security. We will continue cooperating with Vietnam in this important area." (Việt Anh, 2019).

Entering 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound and far-reaching impact on each country, region and global economic, political, and social situation. Besides the pandemic, other non-traditional security challenges have emerged sharply, including water security issues, natural disasters, and floods that have strongly impacted Southeast Asia, including Vietnam. The situation in the South China Sea has many new complications with tense moves from China, creating potential risks to peace and stability in the region. All these factors have a significant impact on India-Vietnam relations. Despite this, the two countries continue to maintain ties, maintaining critical areas of cooperation, including the oil and gas sector. On February 25, 2020, within the framework of the program of working and promoting investment in India, Minister of Planning and Investment of Vietnam Nguyen Chi Dung had separate working sessions with major Indian oil and gas groups such as ONGC, Essar... at the Vietnamese Embassy in India. Indian oil and gas groups still wish to collaborate with Vietnam in signed projects. They are willing to participate in other potential projects, as well as willing to cooperate with Vietnam in the oil and gas exploration and production in a third country (Bộ Công Thương, 2020).

On December 21, 2020, Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi co-chaired the Vietnam - India online summit. The two Prime Ministers representing the two countries expressed their determination to overcome the challenges of the pandemic, continue to deepen the India-Vietnam relations based on traditional friendship, historical ties, culture and religion, mutual understanding and trust, as well as similar visions and interests between the two countries on regional and international issues. The two countries' Prime Ministers issued a Joint Statement on "Common Vision of Peace, Prosperity, and People to Guide the Development of the India-Vietnam Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in the Future" (Chính phủ Việt Nam, 2020). On this occasion, the Foreign Ministers of the two countries signed the Action Program to implement the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in 2021-2023. Ministries and sectors of the two countries also signed seven documents. They announced three cooperation programs in many fields, including oil and gas (Báo Nhân dân, 2020), contributing to deepening and developing bilateral relations.

CONCLUSION

After the end of the Cold War (1991), Vietnam played a pivotal role in India's "Look East Policy" and now India's "Act East", an essential strategic link to promote India's political, economic and security interests in Southeast Asia and Asia in general. Therefore, strengthening cooperation with Vietnam in many fields, including collaboration in oil and gas, is particularly interesting to India. India and Vietnam have jointly conducted oil and gas exploration and production since 1988. This cooperation has been expanded since the two countries agreed to cooperate on new blocks in Vietnam in 2014 and even identified cooperation models involving third countries in oil and gas cooperation projects in 2018, as mentioned above. Joint oil and gas projects between the two countries in Vietnam's exclusive economic zone and the South China Sea continental shelf are strategically significant to India and Vietnam. India's cooperation projects with Vietnam on the continental shelf of Vietnam, despite China's objections to Airy, reflect India's support for Vietnam's claims

and India's respect for and protect international law, including UNCLOS 1982. The attitude of the Indian side contributes to promoting the strategic partnership between the two countries. At the same time, it also shows Vietnam's serious attitude towards the relationship between the two countries. India's presence in the South China Sea balances the strategy and ensures regional security. True to the statement of Prime Minister of India Narendra Modi, cooperation between India and Vietnam is one: "We will jointly work for an open, independent and prosperous Indo-Pacific region where sovereignty and international laws are reputable and where differences are resolved through talks" (PTI, 2018).

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

This research is funded by Vietnam National University Ho Chi Minh City (VNU-HCM) under grant number C2024-18b-11.

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Vietnam - India Oil and Gas Cooperation: From “Strategic Partnership” To “Comprehensive Strategic Partnership”

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