

EVA STALIN IAS ACADEMY - BEST IAS COACHING IN CHENNAI

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Taking a giant leap for a new ethics in outer space

The itch to get there first and fast is human. Being competitive is part of the human's survival instincts. The urge to plant one's flag there before the other flag-bearer does is human too. It is part of the human's political instincts.

Some 11 decades ago, in 1910-12, both itch and urge were quivering in the northern hemisphere. Robert Scott, a 43-year-old British naval officer, was preparing a daring expedition to the South Pole. Around the same time, a Norwegian explorer Roald Amundsen, about four years younger, was planning a bold ice-drift to the North Pole. On learning of dubious but loud claims by two Americans Frederick Cook and Robert Peary, Amundsen lost interest in that destination; it had been reached. But the South Pole beckoned. While others had fringed that continent of ice, no human foot had stood on the southern-most point of the earth.

Setting foot on the South Pole

Scott and Amundsen knew of each other's target and goal. But observing due courtesies alright, they raced to it. Scott and his men with dogs and horses, Amundsen with his dogs and sledges. Amundsen and his five companions, with 16 surviving dogs, got there on December 14, 1911, 34 days before Scott and his team of five did. Planting the Norwegian flag there, Amundsen felt fulfilled, as he should have. He named their South Pole camp Polheim, meaning Pole-home, in Norsk. And he renamed the Antarctic Plateau as King Haakon VII's Plateau, after his monarch. Scott and his team were to perish on the pole, having been caught in foul weather.

On exploration's success scrolls, Amundsen is placed on top; in legend and lore, Scott has for all time outpaced his Norwegian rival. Any race has its victories; some have ironies, besides.

In 1939, Norway laid claim to a vast area of Antarctica which it called Dronning Maud Land, or Queen Maud Land, after its reigning Queen, wife of King Haakon. This area covers about a sixth of the entire continent. There followed another Norwegian claim to Peter I Island, which is about 450km off the western side of the Antarctic peninsula.

Britain had been outdone by Norway on the south Pole. But she was not going to be out of the race for territorial claims over Antarctica. Nor others. And now, apart from Norway the first South Pole 'arrivee' and claimant, Britain the second South Pole 'arrivee' and claimant, there are five others who have sharply defined areas on Antarctica which they regard as 'theirs' - Australia, Argentina, Chile, France and New Zealand. So Antarctica has seven flags flying on their own 'Antarctic territories'. How are these seven tracts of Antarctic ice over which flags of different stripes fly, then, different from colonies of the imperial era? They are different. There are no subject people there, no 'native' residents, who are being denied freedom, no resources are



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being drained out from there to the 'mother country'. But then why were the seven on that inhospitable continent at all?

Regulation and Antarctica's well-being

With the International Geophysical Year (IGY) in 1958 seeing many players becoming active in Antarctica, and fears of Cold War rivalry taking unexpected turns, United States President Dwight D. Eisenhower convened in 1959 an Antarctic Conference of the 12 countries active in Antarctica during the IGY, to negotiate a treaty. When Argentina proposed that atomic explosions be banned in toto on Antarctica, the U.S. objected, saying only those tests that were carried out without prior notice and consultation should be banned. The USSR and Chile supported the Argentine proposal, leading the U.S. to agree and take the negotiations forward.

In the present times when satellites can pick up any activity that is suspicious, none of them can do anything questionable there. They will be found out. But even before the world developed its sky-eyes, the early Antarcticans had to share their space with others if only to justify their own. Argentina, Australia, Belgium, Chile, France, Japan, New Zealand, Norway, South Africa, the Soviet Union, the United Kingdom, and the United States - 12 countries - had established over 55 Antarctic research stations for the IGY and they had to make the Treaty accord full acceptance to two basics: freedom of scientific research in Antarctica and the peaceful use of the continent. An indirect consensus emerged for demilitarisation as the treaty prohibited nuclear testing, military operations, economic exploitation, and further territorial claims in Antarctica. Today there are 54 parties to the Treaty, with 29 having consultative status, India with its own station on Queen Maud's Land being one of those 29, that have 'demonstrated their interest in Antarctica by carrying out substantial scientific activity there'. Close monitoring systems are in position to regulate the activities of the countries with a presence on Antarctica in order to maintain its ecological integrity. But the fact that there are around 66 scientific stations in Antarctica, 37 being occupied year round, the remainder closing down for winter and some 4,000 people through the summer months and about 1,000 over winter each year living on it, in my opinion, compromises its well-being. Is the work being done for humanity's good from there sufficient ground for the present and future footprint of humanity on its climatically challenged surface?

But this article is not about the earth's South Pole alone.

The earth's seas and ice are different from the sky and its spheres but we know that there has long been an Antarctic-type race in outer space between the powers which have perfected, with great toil and at great expense, to penetrate it and go higher and higher, faster and faster, than their

several peers. And the world has been all too aware of the need, dire and pressing, to prevent an arms race in outer space.

An agreement that is about restraint

Even as the earth's South Pole drew Amundsen and Scott to it, the moon pulled Russia's Luna-25 lander and India's Chandrayaan-3 to it. The Indian vehicle reached its destination, but the Russian was not so fortunate. And just as the world's engagement with Antarctica led to a treaty, so does the Moon Agreement adopted by the General Assembly in 1979 in resolution 34/68 (elaborating on many of the provisions of the Outer Space Treaty) provide that space-probing humanity's dealings with the moon should be used exclusively for peaceful purposes; that its environment should not be disrupted; that the United Nations should be informed of the location and purpose of any station established on it. The agreement states that the moon and its natural resources are the common heritage of mankind and that 'an international regime should be established to govern the exploitation of such resources' when such exploitation is about to become feasible. The Moon Agreement is far-sighted. Something of the world's experience of Antarctica and the working of the Antarctic Treaty informs it. The Moon Agreement is a self-regulating covenant of restraint. It anticipates human appetites for turf, for control, for the urge to get there first, flag and all, and dig in.

Pride and exhilaration over the Chandrayaan-3 achievement, entirely natural, must now be followed by a mature policy on the future of India's earth-borne plans on the moon. To put it differently, as an earth-pioneer on the moon, India must, by precept and practice, set the pace for the earth's agenda on the moon and of the moon's future as a partner with the earth. As a partner, not as property. As a collaborator in science, not a colony in subjugation. The Moon Agreement must be taken to its next logical stage. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's statement - "The success of Chandrayaan 3 is not just India's alone but it belongs to all of humanity" - was wise and responsible. Following up on that, he can now do the world's space missions great service. He can do so now by taking the initiative to craft a declaration of the fundamental rights of outer space. And thereby inaugurate a new ethics for human activity in outer space, including, very pointedly, the earth's responsibilities towards outer space debris. This new ethic must make the non-militarisation of outer space a non-negotiable covenant. The Outer Space Treaty and Moon Agreement now need aligning not just with the latest advances in space missions but with a moral compass to the stars.

India cannot afford to be among those who may want to scramble for outer space herenow over what is not just the common heritage of humankind but that of a larger cosmos.

India must set the pace for the world's agenda on the moon

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Vietnam, key piece of America's Indo-Pacific puzzle

In international relations, strategic turnarounds are not uncommon, and are in fact embedded in the very tapestry of anarchical structural realities. Yet, even by those standards, the immediacy and scale of the volte-face in relations between the United States and Vietnam since the Cold War has been remarkable. On September 10, the General Secretary of the Communist Party of Vietnam Central Committee, Nguyen Phu Trong, and the U.S. President, Joe Biden, met in Vietnam during Mr. Biden's visit, marking a new phase in the bilateral relationship between the two countries. The standout from this meeting was the elevation of U.S.-Vietnam relations to a U.S.-Vietnam Comprehensive Strategic Partnership from a U.S.-Vietnam Comprehensive Partnership forged in 2013 between Vietnam President Truong Tan Sang and U.S. President Barack Obama.

A complex foreign policy legacy

Given the complex history of U.S. involvement in Vietnam during the Cold War, this elevation marks a significant step up. Vietnam's strategic restraint notwithstanding, motivations for an upgrade in bilateral relationship have existed on either side, at least since 2013, if not before. Vietnam's reservations about entering into a strategic partnership with the U.S. have both contemporary and historical relevance. The geopolitics involving China's growing belligerence in the Pacific theatre, felt most palpably in the waters surrounding Vietnam and the broader South China Sea, has proven to be a first order deterrent for Vietnam's great power engagements. On the other hand, the historical legacy of Vietnam's contested relations with the U.S. during the Vietnam War, an axile relationship with the communist states China and the Soviet Union, culminating in the Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation with Soviet Union in 1978, had together imparted a direction diametrically opposite to U.S. interests. This complex foreign



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The Biden administration has shown an unusual nimbleness in its strategic embrace of Vietnam; there has been a rapid expansion of ties in various fields

policy legacy is the reason why hitherto Vietnam has entered into a 'comprehensive strategic partnership' with only four nations: China, Russia, India and South Korea.

This year marks the 50th anniversary of the Paris Peace Accords signed in 1973 to end the Vietnam War. Much water has flown under the bridge, in that Vietnam's relations with the U.S. have come a long way. Mr. Biden's Indo-Pacific policy now counts Vietnam as among the U.S.'s 'leading regional partners' in the region. Vietnam is the 10th largest goods trading partner of the U.S. In 2020, the total value of trade in goods and services between the U.S. and Vietnam amounted to approximately \$92.2 billion and exceeded \$138 billion in 2022. In May 2022, the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF) was launched by the U.S., with Vietnam as a founding member along with 13 other countries to revive Washington's economic dynamism in the Asia-Pacific.

Bolstering ties

The Biden administration has depicted an unusual nimbleness in its strategic embrace of Vietnam. The visits by U.S. Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin and Vice President Kamala Harris to Vietnam in 2021, the meeting between Secretary Austin and Vietnamese Minister of National Defence of Vietnam General Phan Van Giang in Singapore in June 2022, and visits by U.S. Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken and Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen this year have culminated in Mr. Biden's visit and augmenting of the bilateral relationship.

The U.S.-Vietnam relationship is now rapidly expanding its bilateral spectrum with an emphasis on enhancing political trust, strengthening science, technology, health and digital innovation cooperation, training of high-quality workforce, addressing climate change, and establishing a strong defence relationship in the backdrop of China's increasing

assertiveness. Addressing legacy issues underlines these cooperative efforts.

An assertive China

The war in Europe has thrown new challenges for Vietnam as its weapons import from Russia – its largest defence supplier – has been hit by West-led sanctions. These limitations in the face of Vietnam's resolve to modernise its military, coupled with an ever-growing assertiveness from China, is also gradually nudging Vietnam in a new direction. China's dramatic steps in 2014 to place oil rigs in Vietnam's Exclusive Economic Zone and subsequent assertive posturing have tested its avowed policy to stay clear of great power politics in the region. Undoubtedly, Washington senses an opportunity here and bolstering the defence and security relationship with Vietnam is a key piece of America's grand strategy in the Indo-Pacific.

An important component of Mr. Biden's visit was to start the process of friend-shoring supply chains in the semiconductor industry to Vietnam, even as it seeks to boost Hanoi's chip manufacturing capabilities. As the two countries seek an expanded economic partnership by increasing investments in critical technologies, chips and Artificial Intelligence, there is space for linking such partnerships across the broader realms of the Indo-Pacific with like-minded partners. India's initiative on Critical and Emerging Technology (ICET) partnership with the U.S. along with the Quad's Principles of critical and emerging technology could provide an overarching framework in the Indo-Pacific for a standardisation of technology in its design, development and use. A supply chain arch which extends from Vietnam to Europe via West Asia, and anchored by India with the newly-launched India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor during the recent G-20 meet in India could symbolise 'comprehensive strategic partnership' in an apt way.