



### ANALYSING INDIA-SOUTH KOREA DEFENCE TIES AND KOREA'S DEFENCE INDUSTRY

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The 50th anniversary of South Korea and India's diplomatic ties was celebrated in 2023.<sup>1</sup> Relative to President Moon Jae-in's "New Southern Policy (NSP)" in 2017, there have been significant changes in Seoul and New Delhi's relationship. As part of an overall effort to strengthen its diplomatic, commercial, cultural, and geopolitical ties with neighbouring countries, the South Korean government has prioritised its relations with India in recognition of its influence in South Asia. The two governments have formed a strong, multifunctional partnership that addresses a wide range of issues, from security and the economy to energy and terrorism. As India becomes a more significant participant in the Indo-Pacific area, it appears as a potential partner that may aid South Korea in diversifying its economic portfolio.

Historically, a "Long-Term Cooperative Partnership for Peace and Prosperity" was inked in 2004, setting the foundation for strong economic and strategic connections and marking the beginning of India and Republic of Korea's (ROK) strategic alliance.<sup>2</sup> To assist Korean businesses interested in Indian business initiatives, the Indian Chamber of Commerce in Korea was founded six years later. When ROK President Lee Myung-bak visited India in 2010, the friendship grew even stronger. This allowed for an upgrade to a "Strategic Partnership," which was later raised to a "Special Strategic Partnership" during Prime Minister Narendra Modi's formal visit to South Korea in 2015. PM Modi followed the 'Act-East Policy' to further boost the strategic partnership between India and South Korea.

### Tracing the Partnership and Convergences

India's External Affairs Minister Jaishankar emphasised that India-South Korea

represent "an opportunity to take forward the special strategic partnership between the two sides" and in "the situation in the Indo-Pacific region" during the two-day visit of South Korean delegates to New Delhi in April 2023.<sup>3</sup> In return, South Korea's Foreign Minister Park Jin remarked, "South Korea and India are natural partners and I have a strong belief that the special strategic partnership between our two countries is the strongest partnership in the Indo-Pacific region".<sup>4</sup> The straightforward exchange of ideas between the two sides demonstrates the potential scope of collaboration that could emerge on Indo-Pacific issues. The two nations' Indo-Pacific strategies—which have been progressively evolving since the late 2000s—were declared providing them with the strategic room to engage in cooperation.

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One aspect of India's Indo-Pacific security plans that stands out is its aim to create a new balance for the area within the framework of a rule-based order, rather than entering into or creating a military alliance. Due to the lack of political and/or security rivalry in their pasts and the absence of bilateral disputes, India and South Korea have the chance to discuss their interests from a fresh perspective.

The Yoon administration presented South Korea's Indo-Pacific strategy in a document published by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, South Korea, on December 28, 2022. One of the strategy's key tenets was "our Strategy for a Free, Peaceful, and Prosperous Indo-Pacific will be our blueprint for future-oriented partnerships that serve shared interests across the Indo-Pacific."<sup>5</sup> In its recently unveiled Indo-Pacific policy, South Korea places a strong focus on fostering networks and increased cooperation, based on the principles of partnership and a commitment to inclusion in general.<sup>6</sup> It makes sense, then, that Seoul would embrace New Delhi's network-building strategy.

## **Fostering Defence Cooperation**

India and South Korea have greatly improved their defence ties in recent years. Since 2015, they have held yearly Defence Ministerial Dialogues, which were upgraded to a 2+2 dialogue in 2019. Multiple Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs) have been signed by both nations to further their collaboration in defence, research, and development. For cooperative defence research and development initiatives, the Defense Acquisition

Program Administration (DAPA) of the Republic of Korea and the Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) of India has been holding regular steering committee meetings.

As "the two countries look to strengthen strategic ties in the Indo-Pacific region," South Korean President Yoon Suk-Yeol and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi decided to increase defence and space cooperation on September 10, 2023.<sup>7</sup> One of the noteworthy aspects is the ongoing combined naval exercises between Seoul and New Delhi. On October 1, 2022, the Indian destroyer—INS Sumedha—and the navy vessels Hansando and Dae Cheong of South Korea took part in an exercise in the Bay of Bengal as part of a maritime collaboration.<sup>8</sup> Tactical manoeuvres, communication exercises, and helicopter operations were all part of this multinational naval exercise.

2019 saw the signing of a 'roadmap' for weapons industry cooperation between Seoul and New Delhi, which calls for more collaboration in the Research and Development (R&D) and military industry sectors. The defence ties between South Korea and India have improved recently in the land, air, and sea domains. This has occurred because both parties want to establish closer relations in the co-production and manufacturing of defence-related goods. Defence co-production offers opportunities for mutual benefit, especially for the Indian Army and Navy, which are trying to wean themselves off of Russia in the wake of the conflict in Ukraine. India's liberalised defence manufacturing policies can help South Korea collaborate with regional defence producers through joint ventures, knowledge transfer, and exporting the goods both domestically and to other growing markets.

General Park An-su, the Chief of Staff of the Republic of Korea Army, and the Chief of the Indian Army met in Seoul in November 2023 to "exchange views on the regional security situation" and discuss how to "strengthen bilateral defense cooperation."<sup>9</sup> A group from the Indian Army visited South Korea in June 2024 to talk about cooperation in the land domain. The following month, a mission from the Indian National Defence College travelled to South Korea to exchange views. The goal of all these military exchanges is to fortify defence relations between the two nations, which is essential for building mutual respect and understanding amongst the armed services.

### **South Korea's Defence Industry and Partnership with India**

The defence sector in South Korea has advanced significantly in the international arms market in recent years. There is conjecture that South Korea may rank among the top four or five arms exporters by the end of the decade, though it is unclear if this trend will continue.

The deteriorating external security situation and the direct government support for the industry, has been the primary drivers of South Korea's defence industry's rise. In order to rebuild the nation after the Korean War, the South Korean government concentrated on preserving national security and promoting economic expansion following the armistice that ended the conflict with North Korea in 1953. Of particular concern was the belief in Seoul that North Korea was more resource-rich and economically developed than South Korea. Thus, the government prioritised developing a defence-industrial base that could support the economy and improve the fighting capabilities of the ROK armed forces, in combination with multiple iterations of five-year national economic development plans.

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The defence industry, known as 'K-Bangsan,' is something that the people of Korea are proud of. It not only supports their political belief in their growing military capability against North Korea, China, and Russia, but it also serves as an emerging industrial sector supporting future economic growth.<sup>10</sup> Yoon Suk-yeol's conservative foreign policy views Korea as a 'global pivotal state.'

India has started importing more military hardware and equipment from South Korea. Seoul is ranked as India's fifth-largest arms exporter over the five-year period from 2018 to 2022, accounting for 2.8 per cent of India's total arms purchases, according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute.<sup>11</sup> It's important to note that South Korea is ranked as an emerging arms exporter, falling between leading nations like Israel (7.7 per cent), France (28.6 per cent), Russia (45.1 per cent), the UK (2 per cent) and Germany (1.4 per cent).<sup>12</sup>

Previously, private sector collaboration served as the foundation for the significant development of defence industrial alliance between Korea and India. One example of this was the 2017 joint venture between Samsung-Techwin of Korea and Larsen & Toubro (L&T) of India to construct K-9 Vajra howitzers for the Indian Army. Partnership in shipbuilding between the defence industry and the MoU was pledged in 2017. The two governments laid the foundation for their combined production of five Fleet Support Ships valued at US \$1.5 billion and two strategically operated vessels that came with a price tag of about US \$448 million.<sup>13</sup>

There have been some talks of producing 12 minesweepers for the Indian Navy in collaboration with Korea's Kangnam Corporation and India's Goa Shipyard, as well as about constructing a conventional submarine through a joint venture. These agreements ultimately proved unsustainable, and several further talks on defence cooperation were held.

To discuss potential joint ventures on utility helicopters, LT tanks, diesel submarines, lithium batteries for Future Ready Combat Vehicles, and submarines, Indian companies have contacted reputable Korean partners. Several cutting-edge

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naval shipbuilding technologies are also being considered by the Korean industry for transfer to India in order to support planned Indian navy projects, including Landing Platform Docks (LPD), Fleet Support Ships (FSS), and Mine Countermeasure Vessels (MCMV).<sup>14</sup> Moreover, talks on a number of subjects, such as smart ammunition, small arms manufacture, batteries, and energy management systems, have been started by Indian partners. On the other hand, India's trade deficit with South Korea has increased, and the Indian government is becoming increasingly concerned about this, as evidenced by the recent statement made by Commerce and Industries Minister Piyush Goyal.

India and South Korea once again had the opportunity to decide to expand their defence cooperation during the G-20 meeting in New Delhi in 2023. Seoul is "totally committed" to extending defence cooperation with India, according to Change Jae-bok, the South Korean envoy to India. Seoul appears to have taken India more seriously than it has in the past, realising that the country is an essential facilitator of stability in the region.

The 10th South Korea-India Joint Commission Meeting was conducted in March 2024 at the Foreign Ministry premises in Seoul by Indian EAM S. Jaishankar and South Korean Foreign Minister Cho Tae-yul.<sup>15</sup> With participation from relevant agencies and discussions covering a broad range of bilateral and global concerns, the meeting provided Seoul and New Delhi with a crucial forum, presided over by foreign ministers.

Cho and Jaishankar promised continued cooperation during the meeting to guarantee successful completion of the second phase of licensing South Korea's K-9 Howitzer, which they described as "a symbol of defense cooperation between the two countries." Based on the K9 Thunder platform, India is producing its own version of the self-propelled howitzer, the K9 Vajra, using technology that was supplied from major South Korean defence manufacturer Hanwha Aerospace.

## Conclusion

The potential for India and South Korea's growing Indo-Pacific ties is greater because both nations share a common goal of bolstering regional stability through their support of ASEAN centrality, India's Indo-Pacific initiatives, and

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other shared interests.

To strengthen both countries' strategic independence in the Indo-Pacific region, South Korea and India are expanding their security collaboration network, as evidenced by recent advances in their relationship. South Korea and India can both play significant roles in the Indo-Pacific region by assisting in the realisation

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of their agendas for sustainable development through both bilateral and multilateral frameworks, thanks to their common security relationship with the US and democratic ideals.

The EAM's visit to Seoul this year contributed to the broader efforts to strengthen defence ties between the two nations, especially in the maritime area where shared values and interests are moulded by South Korea's Indo-Pacific strategy and India's Indo-Pacific vision. As he argued for Seoul's involvement in the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI), which addresses a range of issues from conventional and non-conventional security, Indian Minister S Jaishankar emphasised the significance of bolstering South Korea's maritime cooperation with India and Indo-Pacific multilateral initiatives. India will benefit from South Korea's extensive expertise in building a reputable domestic defence industry as it works toward its objective of developing a hub for domestic technological manufacture. Additionally, it will help significantly increase India's defence exports. Both countries are aiming to strengthen future ties, creating a new alignment of capabilities, and promoting even closer collaboration through policies and agreements like the Indo-Pacific Strategy, Act East Policy, New Southern Policy, Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA), and reciprocal high-level visits.

## Notes:

<sup>1</sup> Lakhvinder Singh, “Korea celebrate 50th anniversary of diplomatic ties”, *Asia Times*, December 11, 2023, <https://asiatimes.com/2023/12/india-korea-celebrate-50th-anniversary-of-diplomatic-ties/>. Accessed on September 09, 2024.

<sup>2</sup> Yeon-Jung JI, “A Shared Vision Begets the Future: Korea-India Defense Cooperation”, *The Journal of Indian and Asian Studies*, vol. 04, no. 02, 2023, [https://www.worldscientific.com/doi/10.1142/S2717541323400065?srsId=AfmBOoqB5H-wcXkKjbi72IuiElKnW9kSjCDET1PF\\_IvxTYK49RsooUDo](https://www.worldscientific.com/doi/10.1142/S2717541323400065?srsId=AfmBOoqB5H-wcXkKjbi72IuiElKnW9kSjCDET1PF_IvxTYK49RsooUDo). Accessed on September 09, 2024.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> “India, South Korea aim to consolidate special strategic partnership”, *India Today*, April 07, 2023, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/india-south-korea-aim-to-consolidate-special-strategic-partnership-2357246-2023-04-07>. Accessed on September 09, 2024.

<sup>5</sup> Shinae Lee, “South Korea’s first Indo-Pacific strategy: Seoul’s strategic narratives, ambiguous messages and key challenges”, Sasakawa Peace Foundation, April 01, 2023, [https://www.spf.org/iina/en/articles/lee\\_02.html](https://www.spf.org/iina/en/articles/lee_02.html). Accessed on September 10, 2024.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Lee Haye-ah, “Yoon, Modi agree to boost cooperation in defense, space”, *Yonhap News Agency*, September 10, 2023, <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20230910003600315>. Accessed on September 10, 2024.

<sup>8</sup> “India, South Korea Hold Naval Exercise In Bay Of Bengal”, *BW Defence*, October 04, 2022, <https://bwdefence.com/article/india-south-korea-hold-naval-exercise-in-bay-of-bengal-449260#:~:text=The%20Indian%20and%20South%20Korean,of%20the%20Republic%20of%20Korea>. Accessed on September 10, 2024.

<sup>9</sup> “Army Chief in South Korea to boost Defence Cooperation”, *Times of India*, November 21, 2023, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/army-chief-in-south-korea-to-boost-defence-cooperation/articleshow/105369681.cms>. Accessed on September 10, 2024.

<sup>10</sup> Wooyeal Paik, “South Korean Defense Industry Goes Global, and Local Too: An Econo-Tech Approach”, Italian Institute for International Political Studies, April 08, 2024, <https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/south-korean-defense-industry-goes-global-and-local-too-an-econo-tech-approach-169127#:~:text=The%20Korean%20people%20are%20proud,growing%20military%20capacity%20against%20North>. Accessed on September 10, 2024.

<sup>11</sup> Dinakar Peri, “India remains biggest arms importer between 2018-22 despite drop in overall imports”, *The Hindu*, March 13, 2023, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/india-remains-biggest-arms-importer-between-2018-22-despite-drop-in-overall-imports/article66614120.ece>. Accessed on September 10, 2024.

<sup>12</sup> Yeon-Jung JI, n. 2.

<sup>13</sup> Yoon-jung Choi, “New Indo-Pacific Vision and the Road Ahead for South Korea-India Partnership”, *India-Korea Relations in the Emerging Dynamics of the Indo-Paific*, vol. 211, Special Report, Observer Research Foundation, July 07, 2023, <https://www.orfonline.org/research/india-korea-relations-in-the-emerging-dynamics-of-the-indo-pacific>. Accessed on September 10, 2024.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Wondeuk Cho and Simran Walia, “India-South Korea-US Trilateral Technology Cooperation”, *The Diplomat*, April 16, 2024, <https://thediplomat.com/2024/04/india-south-korea-us-trilateral-technology-cooperation/>. Accessed on September 10, 2024.



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