



President Moon's visit to India: Developments and Trends in India-South Korea 'Special Strategic Partnership'

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Over the last decade, South Korea has emerged to become an important partner of India. During this period the relation between the two countries has become multidimensional and comprehensive. Development of the relationship is reflected in the up gradation of bilateral relations to "Strategic Partnership" in 2010 and then to "Special Strategic Partnership" in 2015. Though there has been substantial development in the last three years, it can be argued that the bilateral partnership is a work in progress as it is still operating below its potential.

The recent state visit of President Moon Jae-in to India during July 8-11, 2018 provided an opportunity to impart new momentum to the relationship. The 'New Southern Policy' of Korea with its focus of strengthening relationship with New Delhi complements India's "Act East Policy". Taking stock of bilateral relations in the last three years and evaluating the outcome of President Moon's visit, the article assesses developments and trends in India-Korea relations as a "Special Strategic Partnership".

The Outcome of India-Korea Summit

Having met previously on the sidelines of Hamburg G20 Summit in July 2017, the July 10th meeting was the second Summit between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and President Moon. At the Summit, they issued a joint vision statement to further strengthen the "Special Strategic Partnership" between the two countries.ⁱ The document incorporated a new narrative of bilateral relations reflecting the convergence of India's "Act East Policy" and President Moon's "New Southern Policy". For the first time, India and Korea shared a vision for regional order by committing to "a peaceful, stable, secure, free, open, inclusive and rules-based region" and to work towards fostering a "future-oriented partnership for People, Prosperity and Peace".ⁱⁱ The former is, in essence, India's vision of Indo-Pacificⁱⁱⁱ and the latter is President Moon Jae-in's

regional vision of 3P- peace, prosperity and people. The bilateral vision for regional peace further recognizes the link between prosperity and security, thus underlining the significance of “freedom of navigation, overflight and unimpeded lawful commerce”.^{iv} It also underlines the principles of “peaceful resolution of conflict through dialogue, underlying the centrality of sovereignty and territorial integrity, in accordance with the universally-recognized principles of international law”.^v

Though the joint statement in substance reflected India’s Indo-Pacific vision, it fell short of endorsing the “Indo-Pacific” concept. However, stating that South Korea “took note of India’s inclusive and cooperative vision for the Indo-Pacific region” indicates Seoul’s growing interest and India’s position on the concept. Bilateral understanding of the principle of the emerging regional order is a positive step towards further cooperation in this direction.

Bilateral cooperation at the international level acquired a new dimension with their agreeing to explore a tripartite partnership for development in a third country. In this regard, both countries agreed to cooperate in capacity building projects in Afghanistan.

Along with peace, the prosperity aspect also found prominence in the bilateral vision to take advantage of complementarities between India’s high economic growth and demographic dividend, and Korea’s advanced technology, manufacturing capability and developmental experience. During the Summit India and Korea signed eleven agreements.^{vi} Among the agreements, two were on the expansion of trade; three focused on science and technology cooperation, two on cultural and people to people relations, a MoU to promote cooperation in future technology and a MoU on railway cooperation.

Agreements on trade aimed at upgrading the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) that came in to effect in 2010 to further expand trade and economic cooperation between the two countries. The negotiation for upgrading CEPA was initiated in 2015 after observing sluggishness in bilateral trade and a low utilisation rate of CEPA. Agreeing to continue the process of CEPA up gradation, they also announced an ‘Early Harvest Package’ and set the goal of achieving USD 50 billion bilateral trade by 2030 against the current level of USD 20 billion. In the Early Harvest Package, Korea will give free access to 17 Indian products to its market, while 11 Korean products will get similar access to the Indian market. Indian products that will get zero market access in Korea include mangoes, beer, popcorn, maize and its derivatives, jelly and jam. The package agreed that India could send yoga trainers and Indian yoga institutes would be permitted to set up training centres in Korea. Similar concessions are given to Korea to promote Taekwondo in India.^{vii}

Observing stagnation and the low utilisation of CEPA, the Indian and Korean leadership in 2015 agreed to upgrade the CEPA. India and Korea conducted five rounds of negotiations. As a result of these negotiations, an interim agreement in the form of an early harvest package was announced during President Moon’s visit. Bilateral trade has shown improvement by reaching 20 billion USD in 2017, compared to 15.7 billion USD in 2016 and 16.2 billion USD in 2015.^{viii} An increasing trade deficit has been an issue of concern for India. As the bilateral trade increased, the deficit has also increased, reaching 10.6 billion USD compared to 7.4 billion USD in 2016. Indian

export to Korea has also been declining during this period. During CEPA up gradation negotiation, India demanded better implementation of the agreement to ensure commensurate benefit for Indian exports. In this direction, India pitched on better market access for pharmaceuticals, agricultural items and IT services.

MoUs signed on railway, future strategy and biotechnology ventures bilateral cooperation into new sectors. The agreement between India's Research Design and Standards Organization (RDSO) and Korea Railroad Research Institute (KRRI) is set to explore cooperation in railway research, exchange of railway related experience and development of railway industries. It also envisages joint research projects, including setting up an advanced railway R&D facility in India and to study the feasibility of a Korean model high-speed train. The Future Strategy Group is a bilateral mechanism established between science and technology ministries of both countries to promote cooperation in future technologies to harness the benefits of the 4th Industrial revolution. Agreement on biotechnology envisions promoting cooperation in the adoption of biotechnology and Bio Big-Data in the areas of health, medicine, agro-fishery products, digital healthcare, precision medicine, brain research, and next generation-medical equipment.

Developments in Bilateral Relations under 'Special Strategic Partnership'

Prime Minister Modi's visit to Seoul in May 2015 was a momentous event in India-Korea relations with the signing of the "Special Strategic Partnership". Prime Minister Modi highlighted that Korea is an 'indispensable partner' in India's "Act East" strategy. It also imparted a new dynamic to India-Korea relations with a focus on developmental partnership. Emphasis was laid on the new developmental mission that the Modi government was implementing at home through its flagship projects like, 'Make in India', 'Swach Bharat' and Digital India. In this regard, several agreements were signed. Also, a broad-based and comprehensive joint statement was issued to advance the Special Strategic Partnership.^{ix}

Over the last three years, high-level bilateral visits have has increased substantially, indicating a better political relationship between the two countries. From India, nine delegations led by a cabinet minister, four chief ministerial visits, one delegation led by Lok Sabha Speaker etc. visited South Korea. Nine South Korean ministers visited India during the last three years.

Despite their increase in high-level ministerial visits, consolidation of existing bilateral institutional mechanisms has been sluggish. For instance, the annual Joint Commission, the most important bilateral mechanism at the foreign minister level was convened last in 2014. The 2+2 meeting at the level of the secretary/ vice minister announced during Prime Minister Modi's visit to Seoul in 2015 is yet to convene.

Cooperation in the defence sector acquired prominence in the Special Strategic Partnership'. A major development in this regard was the MoU signed in April 2017, on Defense Industry Co-operation in Shipbuilding. The agreement was envisaged under the 'Make in India' initiative. It was an umbrella agreement to promote shipbuilding in the defence sector which would be followed up by designated partners from both sides. India nominated Hindustan Shipyard Limited (HSL), Visakhapatnam from the Indian side for the collaboration and Hyundai Shipbuilding was designated as the Korean partner.^x Another highlight of the defence cooperation

is the partnership between India's Larsen & Turbo (L&T) and Korea's Samsung-Techwin to produce K-9 Vajra howitzers for the Indian Army signed in April 2017.^{xi} The deal is worth \$ 700 million and constitutes the largest order placed by the Ministry of Defense with a private company under the 'Make in India' initiative.

Under the 'Special Strategic Partnership' interaction between India and Korea, cooperation between the armed forces have also witnessed an upward swing. In April 2018, joint anti-piracy, search-and-rescue exercise 'SAHYOG-HYEOLYEOG 2018' was conducted by Indian and Korean Coast Guards. As part of the exercise, ships of both countries conducted tactical manoeuvres and "drills" to counter piracy and carry out maritime law enforcement tasks.^{xii} The navies of South Korea and India held a joint drill in the Indian Ocean as a fleet of South Korean warships visited Mumbai in October 2017.^{xiii} The drill, held involved a range of destroyers, military ships and other assets from the two nations, according to South Korean military officials. Five Indian Navy vessels have sailed to Korea over the past three years, extending the military to military cooperation between two countries.

During the visit of Indian Finance Minister Arun Jaitley to Korea in June 2017, both countries signed an agreement to establish USD 9 billion in concessional credit and USD 1 billion in Official Development Assistance (ODA) funding for infrastructure development projects in India, which was announced during Prime Minister's visit to Korea in 2015.^{xiv} Korea became the first country other than the G7 countries to become an ODA contributor to India. In September 2017, it was announced that funds would be used for three mega infrastructure projects; Nagpur-Mumbai super communication expressway (NMSE), Kalyan-Dombivali smart city and Bandra Government colony redevelopment.^{xv}

In promoting cooperation in the maritime sector, a bilateral agreement on mutual assistance in port development was signed in April 2016.^{xvi} The purpose of the agreement was to promote cooperation in areas including sharing of technology and experiences in port development and operation and joint participation in port-related construction, building and engineering projects of mutual interest amongst others.^{xvii} The choice of selecting Korea as the partner country for the first India Maritime Summit in 2016 underscores the potential for bilateral cooperation in the maritime sector.^{xviii} In April 2018, India and Korea signed an agreement on mutual recognition of competency certificates of seafarers, paving the way for Indian mariners to seek employment on more than 500 Korean ships.^{xix}

Korean investment in India has picked up momentum since both countries signed Special Strategic Partnership. Korean companies invested nearly USD 3.5 billion in the last three years into India's automobiles and auto components, electronics, chemicals, technical textiles, food processing, finance and other industries.^{xx} Some of the new Korean investment includes the Hyundai Motors announcement of USD 1 billion to build a new production centre in January 2018.^{xxi} In February 2018, Hyosung Corporation of South Korea, the largest global spandex producer, announced an investment worth USD 500 million in a manufacturing facility in Maharashtra.^{xxii} Lotte Confectionery announced in November 2017, the acquisition of Havmor Ice Cream Ltd. (HIL) in India investing USD 300 million.^{xxiii} In February 2017, Kia Motors, a sister company of Hyundai, announced its plans to invest about USD 2 billion in the greenfield plant coming up in Anantapur district of Andhra Pradesh.^{xxiv} Following Kia's investment, its 16 sub-contractor companies signed MoU with Andhra Pradesh government for an investment worth

USD 700 million in March 2018, for setting up an ancillary unit to cater to Kia motor.^{xxv} In January 2018, Youngone Corporation of Korea announced a USD 300 million investment project in Kakatiya Mega Textile Park, Warangal, Telangana.^{xxvi}

Indian investment in Korea is about USD 3 billion. Major Indian investment in Korea includes Mahindra and Mahindra (USD 1.5 billion), Novelis Inc (USD 700 million), Tata Motors Limited (USD 400 million) and Nakhoda Ltd (USD 40 million).

Another important development in India-Korea economic relations is the positive trend of joint ventures between India and Korean companies in India. It is a significant development because the predominant model of Korea investment in India has so far been in the form of wholly owned enterprises. New joint ventures include, LG Chem and Mahindra&Mahindra announced partnership on lithium-ion battery technology for electric vehicles,^{xxvii} Tata Projects and Daewoo E&C joint venture on Mumbai Maritime Bridge project,^{xxviii} Bharti Airtel and SK Telecom in 5G technology,^{xxix} Sun Pharmaceutical Industries and Samsung BioLogics for the manufacturing of biological drug Tildrakizumab,^{xxx} and Twinstar company a joint venture between LG and Vedanta to set up an electronics product manufacturing facility in Maharashtra investing USD 2 billion.^{xxxi}

Korean infrastructure companies have increased their footprint in India. For instance, Doosan Power Systems clinched two super-critical power projects of 1,320 MW each in Uttar Pradesh worth USD 2.3 billion.^{xxxii} In 2016, Doosan won a contract worth USD 291.06 million to build three 660-megawatt boilers at the Barh Super Thermal Power Project-I in Bihar.^{xxxiii}

'Korea Plus', a special initiative to promote and facilitate Korean Investments in India was launched in June 2016. It is envisaged as the first contact point for Korean investors in India with a mandate to facilitate and follow-up. In the last two year, Korea Plus facilitated more than 100 Korean investments.^{xxxiv} It works closely with the Prime Minister's office and the commerce ministry.

A new development in India-Korea relations is the emerging dynamics of para-diplomacy, with Indian state governments playing an important role in promoting bilateral engagement.^{xxxv} The pro-active role of state governments is reflected in the increasing number of chief ministerial and their respective ministerial delegation to Korea. They also engage in a broad range of activities including road shows and other business meetings. In the last three years, chief ministerial and other ministerial delegations from Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Maharashtra, Chhattisgarh, Punjab, and Madhya Pradesh visited Korea. The pattern of new Korean investment testifies to the effectiveness of state governments' role in promoting India-Korea relations.

The 'New Context' of Bilateral Relations

A major factor that pushed India and Korea relations over the last two decades has been the convergence of economic and business interest. Facilitated by complementarities of economic structures of the two countries, much has happened in bilateral economic ties. In comparison, articulation of converged interest in regional and international issues including security has been quite passive. The main reason for bilateral passivity has been a lack of a shared context, as both

countries for a long time remained boxed in their respective regions. The lack of shared context also did not allow them to recognise the 'other' as a priority actor in their respective foreign policies. This has been changing slowly with the adoption of "strategic partnership" in 2010 and "Special Strategic Partnership" in reflecting a changing international context and the emergence of India and Korea as critical actors in international affairs.

A careful reading of South Korea foreign policy under President Moon Jae-in with the adoption of "Northeast Asia Plus" and "New Southern Policy", suggests a growing recognition of India as a prominent actor, thus prioritising Seoul's engagement with New Delhi. Seoul's interest in a closer engagement with India was made clear under President Moon, when he despatched a special envoy to New Delhi just after assuming office in May 2015.^{xxxvi} The gesture was the first of its kind. The "Northeast Asia Plus" strategy manifest Seoul's foreign policy articulation beyond the four major countries like US, China, Russia and Japan and the Northeast Asian region. ASEAN and India emerge as the two main candidates in the new line of thinking. "New Southern Policy" is the specific framework through which the newly found prioritisation of India and ASEAN is being articulated.

During President Moon Jae-in's visit to India along with the elevation of New Delhi's status in Korean foreign policy thinking, a shared perspective on the regional order was expressed. Though not publically endorsing "Indo-Pacific" concept, yet reference to a regional vision in the joint statement that has a close resemblance to India's "Indo-Pacific" imagination, indicates the emergence of a greater convergence of interests and a shared perspective on regional issues. It's the first time that a shared perspective on the regional order was announced. In doing so, Korea has come a long way in recognising India as a key factor in its foreign policy.

Two factors primarily underscore Seoul's new foreign policy thinking. First, Korea's concerns associated with the emergence of an assertive China. China's decision to bully Seoul Korea by implementing informal sanction following the installation of US's Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) in August 2016, fundamentally altered Seoul's perspective on China.^{xxxvii} The incident forced Korea to reevaluate its relation with China. Seoul is adopting a diversification strategy on the view that economic dependence on China has made it increasingly vulnerable to political risks. The second factor is associated with Korea's concern over the uncertainty emerging from the shifting balance of power in the region in the context of the rise of China. This uncertainty got exacerbated by the unpredictability of Washington's Asia policy under President Donald Trump. Protectionist and transactional tendencies reflected in Trump's foreign policy increasingly raises concern in Seoul as it alludes to a retreat from the liberal international order to which Korea pegged its security and prosperity. It is not yet clear as to what is Seoul's evolving thought on this issue, but it is safe to infer that Seoul has an inherent interest in cooperating with countries like India that shares a similar interest in promoting a free, open, inclusive and rule-based regional order that ensures freedom of navigation, overflight and unimpeded lawful commerce.

Conclusion

Bilateral relations between India and Korea has acquired a momentum following the signing of Special Strategic Partnership in 2015. The focus of the partnership during the past three years has been on infrastructure, defense production, trade, investment and maritime sectors. Prime

Minister Modi's developmental initiatives and India's reaching out to South Korea with the launching of 'Act East Policy' was the main driving force of the Special Strategic Partnership in the last three years. President Moon Jae-in's 'New Southern Policy' is adding a new impetus to the relationship. Emerging from the new regional realities, 'New Southern Policy' has economic and geopolitical dimensions. The economic component implies an attempt to diversify Korea's investment beyond China. The diversification strategy of Korea offers opportunities for India. While the economic dimension of the "New Southern Policy" is underway even before President Moon's visit, the geopolitical dimension is yet to take tangible form. The decision to cooperate in capacity building in Afghanistan is a welcome and bold move for regional stability.

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Disclaimer: The views expressed are that of the Researcher and not of the Council.*

Endnotes

Notes

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