

Remarks

by

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“India-ROK Bilateral Relations – The Way Ahead”

Special Event

Hosted by the
Friendship Society and the ROK Embassy

at

ROK Embassy, New Delhi

1st December 2014

It is my privilege and pleasure to address this distinguished audience. I warmly congratulate and commend the host institutions for conceptualizing and organizing this special evening of intellectual, cultural and culinary fare in order to showcase and promote the strong friendship linking India and the Republic of Korea.

The Indian Council of World Affairs (ICWA), the institution I represent here, enjoys a vibrant relationship with its counterparts in ROK. We received a delegation of scholars deputed by Institute of Foreign Affairs and National Security (IFANS) in June 2012. Our delegation of experts, which included Deputy Director General Shri Nagendra Saxena and Ambassador Skand Tayal, paid a reciprocal visit to Seoul last month and held a fruitful dialogue. We are also gratified to recall that our engagement resulted in the publication of Ambassador Tayal's path-breaking book, entitled *India and the Republic of Korea: Engaged Democracies*.

Seeds sown in the past turn into green plants in the future. The evolution of our bilateral relationship in the past two decades contains a clear indicator of a bright future. The road ahead for ties between our two nations promises to take them on a rewarding journey. However, we will have to work harder for it.

In 2013, we celebrated forty years of the establishment of diplomatic relations. Despite India's valuable contribution to the peaceful resolution of the Korean War in the 1950s, the first phase of relations was marked by what has been described as "the strategic disconnect" between the Korean Peninsula and South Asia and, more importantly, between South Korea and India. The impact of globalization, India's policy of economic liberalization, and ROK's successful endeavour to secure 'the first mover's advantage' opened a new era. The strategic disconnect was decisively dented by the cumulative effect of policies pursued by three countries, namely Pakistan, North Korea and China. Without going into details, it is sufficient to point out that these developments drove India and ROK to reassess their own policy approaches to each other, bringing them closer due to a growing convergence of interests. The fact that both nations are thriving democracies committed to the cause of stability, security, balance and peace in East Asia provides potent sustenance to the mutually beneficial relationship.

Between 1993 when Prime Minister Narasimha Rao visited ROK and 2010, the year in which strategic partnership was launched, bilateral relations have come a long way. Each country seems to accord a place of considerable significance to the other in its world view. Notably, both of us are located in dangerous neighbourhoods.

For ROK, it is a matter of priority to maintain balance between its relations with China on the one hand, and the US, Japan and other partners on the other. As regards India, it is now changing gears, while executing the shift from Look East Policy (LEP) to Act East Policy (AEP). The latter lays stress on action, implementation and economic ties – the notions dear to ROK's ethos. This policy is noteworthy for two other reasons also: its emphasis on strategic cooperation and on expanding geographical footprint. Under the new leadership, India is determined to become an effective player on the stage that extends from Myanmar to the South Pacific. From this angle, the importance of ROK in India's foreign policy calculus is certain to rise further. In this light, it may be argued that the main thrust of policy and promotional efforts should be on five specific areas.

First, political proximity between the two governments needs to be deepened. Visits at HOS/HOG level have become fairly frequent. This should now pave the way for annual summits. A possible visit by PM Modi to ROK will be especially helpful.

Second, trade, investment and technology linkages deserve to be given an additional fillip. Korean companies – LG, Samsung, Hyundai, Daewoo etc. – are now household names in India. As strategic analyst Raja Mohan pointed out: “The change in the nature of economic relationship provided the basis for a comprehensive advancement of the ties between the two countries.” However, ROK Inc's share in India's market must expand, particularly with economic reforms 2.0 getting launched here. Besides electronic, automotive, infrastructure and energy sectors, Korean companies should be encouraged to scout around more actively and derive advantages from the improving business environment in India. Pace of growth in trade and investment levels needs to be stepped up.

Third, defence cooperation shows signs of expansion, but much potential remains untapped. The two nations are united in their commitment to the safety of Sea Lanes of Communications (SLOCs), maritime security and mutuality of interests. This should further enhance their strategic cooperation, to be interpreted as widely as possible.

Fourth, there is room for broader deployment of public diplomacy in order to deepen awareness of cultural ties, anchored in the famous legend of the princess from Ayuta or Ayodhya (in India), Buddhism, impact of Gandhian philosophy and the visit of Rabrindr Nath Tagore. Indeed we all look forward to this evening's cultural programme.

Finally, interaction at the level of academic/strategic community and civil society has immense scope as the bilateral agenda widens to include not only bilateral but also regional and global issues in the backdrop of the two nations working together closely at G-20 and East Asia Summit. Exchanges among scholars on a continuous basis are required on the larger questions, including the non-traditional themes in foreign policy, the rise of China, and the prospects for fruition of the Asian century. Only then can useful inputs be provided to policy makers as well as business and social leaders.

In the end, let me voice our satisfaction over the significant progress achieved in the development of bilateral relations in the post-Cold War period. This record, the changing power dynamics in the region, and recent political changes in India and ROK, impart confidence about an even better era in the future.

Thank you very much for your attention.
