



## **Prime Minister Modi's Forthcoming Visit to Korea: Advancing India-Korea Special Strategic Partnership**

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Of late the bilateral relations between India and South Korea (hereafter Korea) have been on an upswing. It is anticipated that Prime Minister Modi's forthcoming visit to Seoul on February 21-22, 2019, will provide further momentum in strengthening the relationship. During his previous visit to Korea in July 2015, the relationship was upgraded to Special Strategic Partnership, highlighting Korea as an 'indispensable partner' in India's 'Act East Policy' (AEP).

Soon after assuming power in 2017, the South Korean President Moon Jae-in, upgraded New Delhi's status in Seoul's foreign policy on par with that of its traditional partners, viz., US, China, Japan and Russia and also reached out to India by sending a special envoy. This symbolic gesture was further substantiated by the announcement of the 'New Southern Policy' (NSP)- a strategy involving eleven ministries headed by President's economic advisor to strengthen Korea's relations with India.

During President Moon's state visit to India in July 2018 a new dynamism in bilateral relations emerging from a strong convergence of interests in AEP and NSP was witnessed. The joint vision document adopted at the July 2018 Summit demonstrated a strong will and determination of the top leadership to advance bilateral relations, with a focus on three pillars, namely, people, prosperity and peace. Prime Minister Modi's quick return visit is a statement of high priority attributed to India-Korea relations.

The optics of India-Korea relations have never been better. This has been particularly made possible by the high level political, diplomatic and cultural visits as well as well-crafted social media interventions by Prime Minister Modi and President Moon. Seoul's cultural outreach, in particular, has had a significant impact on the visibility of Korea and in spreading knowledge of India-Korea ties. The visit of first lady Madam Moon to Varanasi as the Chief Guest

in November 2018, on the occasion of *Deepotsva* celebrations in Ayodhya organised by the UP government appealed to a large number of Indians, who are otherwise not familiar with either Korea or India-Korea relations. Her visit popularised the Korean myth of a nuptial connection dating back two millennia. In Korea, it is believed that an Indian princess named Suriratna from Ayodhya (known in Korea as Heo Hwang-ok) travelled to Korea and married a Korean king. However, the story of the Princess and the cultural connections associated with it was hitherto not well known in India. During her visit, Madam Moon laid the foundation stone for a Memorial of the Princess Suriratna in Ayodhya that would be built jointly by the two countries.

Over the last decade, India-Korea relationship has shaped into a comprehensive and multi-dimensional partnership. The bilateral agenda has expanded to include sophisticated partnerships in technology and defence along with the existing focus on commerce and trade. Under the Special Strategic Partnership agreement the government of India has identified Korea as a critical partner for its various development projects including Make in India, Smart City and *Sagarmala*, among others. A significant development in the infrastructure cooperation is Korean financial support to the tune of US \$10 billion. The fund would be used for three mega infrastructure projects in the state of Maharashtra, Nagpur-Mumbai super communication expressway (NMSE), Kalyan-Dombivali smart city and Bandra Government colony redevelopment.

Recently bilateral relations have attained a strategic dimension with increasing cooperation in defence, security and regional issues. With increasing cooperation in defence, Korea has emerged to become a crucial partner for India's defence modernisation project. A major highlight of the defence production cooperation is the partnership between India's Larsen & Toubro (L&T) and Korea's Samsung-Techwin to produce K-9 Vajra howitzers for the Indian Army. Estimated at 700 million, this project is by far the most significant defence project under the 'Make in India' initiative. Another important development is the emergence of Korea as an important defence supplier. Ministry of Defence selected Korean built Biho self-propelled anti-aircraft defence system as the only candidate qualified for acquisition. The deal which is estimated to be US \$1.6 billion announced in October 2018 is expected to be signed during the forthcoming visit of the Prime Minister.

The third pillar of India-Korea relations, i.e., cooperation to maintain peace and stability has acquired momentum, since both countries share the perception of growing uncertainty in the emerging order in the Indo-Pacific region. As a first step in this direction, India and Korea shared a joint vision for regional order during President Moon's visit in 2018 by committing to ensure "a peaceful, stable, secure, free, open, inclusive and rules-based region".

In a context where Korea is reaching out to India for diversifying its economic dependency on China, expanding its diplomatic horizon beyond Northeast Asia and utilizing opportunities offered by India's economic rise, there is an excellent opportunity to enhance bilateral relations. Taking advantage of the positive momentum, it is expected that a flagship Korean project during Prime Minister's visit would be announced. Agreements to promote cooperation in defence and

security, science and technology, Korean investment in various sectors including defence industry, infrastructure, shipbuilding and steel sector, and cultural and people to people exchange are also expected to be signed

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