

3. India-South Korea Strategic Partnership - Deepening Ties Across Defence, Trade, And Technology – International Relation

1. Why in News

1. Indian Defence Minister's visit to Seoul after South Korean President's visit to India
2. Highlights growing strength and strategic importance of India-South Korea relations
3. Both sides set target of \$50 billion bilateral trade by end of decade
4. Signed 15 MoUs covering trade, technology, strategic cooperation
5. Launched vision for Special Strategic Partnership with frameworks on shipbuilding, maritime logistics, energy security, sustainability

2. Background

India's Role in Korean War

1. India played key diplomatic and humanitarian role in Korea after 1945 and during Korean War (1950–53)
2. **During war** – India sent 60th Parachute Field Ambulance (627 medical staff) treating about 220,000 patients
3. India sponsored UN ceasefire resolution leading to 1953 armistice
4. India chaired Neutral Nations Repatriation Commission (1953–54) supervising POW exchange
5. Demonstrated India's non-aligned but humanitarian approach

Beginning of Diplomatic Relations

1. India and South Korea established consular relations in 1962
2. Formal diplomatic relations in 1973
3. Ties deepened over time with progressive upgradation
4. 2010 – Upgraded to Strategic Partnership
5. 2015 – Further elevated to Special Strategic Partnership during PM Modi's Seoul visit
6. Reflects expanding convergence of interests

3. Areas of Cooperation

Trade and Economic Relations

1. **India-ROK Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA)** – In force since 2010
2. Strengthened bilateral economic engagement

Bilateral trade growth –

3. USD 14.2 billion at CEPA implementation (2010)
4. USD 26.89 billion in 2024–25
5. Increase of nearly 90% demonstrating economic complementarity

India's key exports to ROK –

6. Light oils and related preparations (petroleum products)
7. Aluminium (not alloyed)
8. Ferro-chromium
9. Refined lead
10. Mineral fuel distillates (primarily naphtha)
11. Cereals
12. Iron and steel products

Major imports from ROK –

13. Automobile parts
14. Telecommunication equipment
15. Hot-rolled iron products
16. Refined petroleum products
17. Base lubricating oils

18. Mechanical appliances
19. Electrical machinery and parts
20. Iron and steel products

Foreign Direct Investment –

21. ROK is India's 13th largest FDI investor
22. Cumulative investments of USD 6.91 billion since 2000
23. Major sectors – Automobiles, electronics, steel, chemicals

Defence Relations

1. **Guided by MoUs** – Signed in 2005, 2010, and 2020
2. **Coverage** – Industry, logistics, R&D, defence industrial roadmaps

Recent collaboration –

1. 2025 DRDO-Seoul National University agreement on developing high-power microwave systems
2. Expanded participation in defence exhibitions like KADDEX 2024

K9 Vajra-T programme –

3. Developed under 'Make in India' initiative
4. Flagship project of India-South Korea defence cooperation
5. 155mm/52-calibre tracked self-propelled howitzer
6. L&T manufacturing with South Korean technology transfer (Hanwha Defense)
7. Over 100 units inducted into Indian Army

Submarine collaboration –

8. Emerged as key focus area
9. South Korea's expertise in –
 1. Conventional submarines (diesel-electric)
 2. Lithium-ion battery systems (longer underwater endurance)
 3. Air-Independent Propulsion (AIP) technologies
10. Companies – Hanwha Ocean (formerly Daewoo Shipbuilding)
11. Relevant for India's Project-75I (6 advanced submarines)
12. **Other areas** – Military exchanges, joint training, technology transfers, co-production

Cultural Ties

Ancient connections –

1. Korean text Samguk Yusa mentions Princess Suriratna from Ayodhya
2. Came to Korea in 48 AD
3. Married King Kim Suro of Gaya, became Queen Heo Hwang-ok
4. Many Koreans trace ancestry to her (Gimhae Kim and Heo clans)
5. Some scholars link spread of Buddhism to Korea with her family
6. Ayodhya-Gimhae sister city relationship

Rabindranath Tagore's "Lamp of the East" (1929) –

7. Poem highlights Korea's cultural spirit
8. Remains popular in South Korea
9. Included in school education
10. Symbol of cultural affinity

Modern cultural cooperation –

11. Cultural Exchange Programme (2018)
12. Audio-visual co-production pact (2015)
13. Swami Vivekananda Cultural Centre in Seoul
14. Korean Cultural Centre in New Delhi
15. Growing popularity of K-pop, K-dramas in India
16. Indian films, yoga gaining traction in South Korea

People-to-People Exchange

1. **Indian community in South Korea** – About 18,000 strong
2. Mainly consisting of students, researchers, professionals
3. Large number of students enrolled in Korean universities
4. Especially in STEM fields at postgraduate and doctoral levels
5. Korean language learning growing in India
6. Indian diaspora groups active in community welfare, cultural engagement
7. Tourism exchanges increasing

4. Latest Developments

President Lee Jae Myung's Visit to Delhi

1. India and South Korea agreed to deepen trade, technology, strategic cooperation
2. Marking renewed push in ties after several years
3. High-level political engagement signalling priority

Bilateral Trade Target

1. Set target of \$50 billion bilateral trade by end of decade (2030)
2. Nearly double current levels
3. Requires addressing tariff and non-tariff barriers

Vision for Special Strategic Partnership

1. Launched comprehensive vision document

Frameworks on –

2. **Shipbuilding** – Collaboration in commercial and naval vessels
3. **Maritime logistics** – Port connectivity, shipping services
4. **Energy security** – LNG, renewables, nuclear cooperation potential
5. **Sustainability** – Green technologies, climate action

15 MoUs Signed

1. Covering sectors – Defence, trade, technology, culture, education
2. Institutional mechanisms for implementation

Emerging Technologies Cooperation

Emphasized cooperation in –

1. **Quantum computing** – Joint research, applications
2. **Critical minerals** – Sourcing, processing, supply chain resilience
3. **Semiconductors** – Manufacturing, design ecosystem
4. **Artificial Intelligence** – Research, applications
5. **5G/6G technologies** – Telecom collaboration

Combining strengths –

6. Korea's technological expertise (R&D, advanced manufacturing)
7. India's scale (market size, digital infrastructure, talent pool)

5. Importance of the Partnership

Balance in Indo-Pacific

1. India-South Korea relations important for maintaining balanced Indo-Pacific amid China's growing influence

Both countries share concerns about China's –

2. Economic coercion
3. Maritime assertiveness (South China Sea)
4. Regional hegemony
5. Cooperation supports stable, rules-based regional order
6. Strengthens shared security and strategic interests
7. Alignment with Quad, ASEAN centrality principles

Economic Interdependence

India and South Korea complement each other economically

India provides -

1. Market size (1.4 billion population, growing middle class)
2. IT services and software expertise
3. Skilled labour and demographic dividend
4. Pharmaceutical generics
5. Cost-competitive manufacturing base

South Korea offers -

1. Advanced manufacturing technologies
2. Capital and investment
3. High-tech products (electronics, automobiles, machinery)
4. Innovation ecosystems
5. Global supply chain integration
6. Creating mutual growth and industrial cooperation
7. Win-win economic partnership

Defence Diversification

India-South Korea defence ties shifting to innovation-led cooperation

Involving -

1. Startups and MSMEs in defence sector
2. Research institutions (DRDO, universities)
3. Joint platforms and co-development projects

Benefits for India -

1. Reduces reliance on traditional suppliers (Russia declining, Western alternatives expensive)
2. Access to advanced technologies (AIP, lithium-ion batteries, precision systems)
3. Technology transfer under Make in India
4. Cost-effective solutions

Benefits for South Korea -

1. Expands defence exports to large market
2. Co-production opportunities reducing unit costs
3. Strategic partnership diversifying from US-centric alliances
4. Military exchanges and exercises deepening trust
5. Growing defence-industrial collaboration in Asia

Technology and Innovation Hub

1. Partnership leveraging complementary strengths in technology
2. Joint R&D in emerging domains
3. Startup ecosystem collaboration
4. Digital economy integration

6. Challenges

Trade Imbalance

1. India has significant trade deficit with South Korea
2. 2024-25 - Trade USD 26.89 billion; deficit favoring South Korea

Indian exports face barriers -

1. **Pharmaceuticals** - Regulatory approvals, testing requirements
2. **Agriculture** - Sanitary and Phytosanitary (SPS) measures, quality standards
3. **IT services** - Market access restrictions, visa issues
4. Non-tariff barriers limiting Indian exports
5. Need for level playing field

Slow CEPA Upgradation

Negotiations to upgrade and modernize CEPA facing systemic delays

Issues -

1. Tariff rationalization on sensitive products
2. Investment protections and dispute resolution
3. Services liberalization (movement of professionals)
4. Rules of origin clarity
5. Slowing immediate economic gains
6. Both sides cautious on politically sensitive sectors
7. Requires high-level political push

Geopolitical Pressures

Balancing ties with China and US limiting strategic alignment depth

For India -

1. Managing China border tensions while maintaining economic ties
2. Balancing Quad commitments with strategic autonomy
3. Russia relationship complicating Western partnerships

For South Korea -

1. Heavy security dependence on US
2. Economic dependence on China (largest trading partner)
3. North Korea threat requiring US security umbrella
4. Domestic political sensitivities on Japan relations
5. Both navigating complex regional dynamics
6. Limits how deeply they can align strategically

Technology Transfer Reluctance

1. Critical technology transfers face restrictions
2. Intellectual property concerns
3. Export control regimes (Wassenaar Arrangement) limiting dual-use technology transfers
4. Balance between collaboration and protecting proprietary technologies

Limited Strategic Coordination

1. Unlike US-South Korea alliance or India-Russia partnership, India-ROK lacks deep strategic coordination
2. No military alliance structure
3. Limited intelligence sharing
4. Different threat perceptions (North Korea vs Pakistan/China)

7. Way Forward

Move Beyond Defence-Industrial Cooperation

1. Broader strategic partnership focused on Indo-Pacific stability
2. Rising regional threats (China's assertiveness, North Korea provocations) making deeper coordination important
3. South Korea's internal challenges (economic slowdown, political uncertainties) requiring external partnerships
4. Institutionalize strategic dialogue at National Security Adviser level

Better Market Access

1. Fast-track CEPA upgradation addressing tariff and non-tariff barriers
2. Mutual recognition agreements on standards and certifications
3. Reduce trade deficit through enhanced Indian exports
4. Facilitate services trade especially IT professionals' mobility

Investment Expansion

1. Increase South Korean FDI in India beyond current USD 6.91 billion

2. Focus sectors – Electronics manufacturing, electric vehicles, batteries, semiconductors, renewable energy
3. Investment protection agreements
4. Ease of doing business improvements

High-Tech and Defence Cooperation

1. Joint development in critical technologies – Quantum computing, AI, semiconductors, space
2. Defence co-production and co-development (not just assembly)
3. Technology transfer in submarine technologies, missiles, aerospace
4. Cybersecurity collaboration
5. Critical minerals supply chain cooperation

Stronger People-to-People Ties

1. Increase student exchanges and scholarships
2. Cultural festivals and tourism promotion
3. Language learning programs (Korean in India, Hindi in Korea)
4. Sister city relationships beyond Ayodhya-Gimhae
5. Business delegation exchanges

Evolving into "Futuristic Partnership" in Asia

1. Vision beyond current transactional cooperation
2. Long-term strategic convergence on Indo-Pacific vision
3. Innovation and technology-led partnership
4. Sustainable development and climate action collaboration
5. Democratic values and rules-based order advocacy

Institutional Mechanisms

1. Regular summit-level meetings
2. 2+2 dialogue (Foreign and Defence Ministers)
3. Joint working groups on specific sectors
4. Think tank and academic exchanges
5. Business councils for economic engagement

8. Conclusion

India-South Korea relations evolving from trade-focused partnership into comprehensive strategic alliance driven by shared Indo-Pacific interests, advanced manufacturing, and defence cooperation. Should move beyond defence-industrial cooperation to broader strategic partnership emphasizing shared security, better market access through CEPA upgradation, expanded investment beyond USD 6.91 billion, high-tech cooperation in quantum computing-critical minerals, and stronger people-to-people ties evolving into "futuristic partnership" in Asia balancing China's influence and supporting rules-based regional order.

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