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# Brief

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# Shared Values, Common Goals: Finding Convergences in the Indo-Pacific Strategies of India and South Korea

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## **Abstract**

India and South Korea stand as important middle powers whose influence in the Indo-Pacific region is expanding in their own ways. At the same time, their bilateral partnership today has even bigger potential to serve as a stabilising factor amid shifting regional geopolitical equations. The current year—the 50<sup>th</sup> since the two countries established formal diplomatic ties—is an opportune moment for harnessing their converging interests. This brief highlights the key areas of policy convergence between Seoul and New Delhi, with specific reference to the Indo-Pacific strategies and visions of the two countries.

The 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the establishment of formal diplomatic ties between India and the Republic of Korea (from hereon, South Korea) marks a unique and significant moment in their bilateral journey. The milestone comes at a time of consolidation and deepening of bilateral ties spurred by both geopolitical drivers as well as an acknowledgment of the potential for collaboration across various sectors. In many ways, the India-South Korea partnership has arrived at a natural confluence and holds a pivotal position in the Indo-Pacific region, with both countries characterised by distinct maritime landscapes, their own formidable geopolitical capacities, and focused foreign-policy orientations.

Bilateral relations between India and South Korea trace back to centuries, rooted in ancient trade, and cultural and spiritual exchanges. Since formal diplomatic ties were established in 1973, the diplomatic relationship has grown in scope and depth. This evolution is primarily attributed to shared democratic values, convergent economic interests, and mutual concerns about regional security dynamics, especially regarding North Korea and China.

In 2004, the two recorded a watershed moment in their bilateral ties with the declaration of their ‘Long-Term Cooperative Partnership for Peace and Prosperity’,<sup>1</sup> laying the groundwork for the current expansive economic and strategic ties. The partnership was elevated to a ‘Strategic Partnership’ in 2010<sup>2</sup> during the visit of the then South Korean President Lee Myung-bak to India, and later to a ‘Special Strategic Partnership’<sup>3</sup> during Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s state visit in 2015. Such progression has indicated the importance both nations accord to one another as key partners in the region. Another significant juncture was the signing of the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) in 2009<sup>4</sup> which boosted bilateral trade. These crucial events increased their exchanges in sectors like technology, defence, and culture, putting the relationship in a growth trajectory.

The introduction of Seoul’s Indo-Pacific strategy in 2022 signifies a clear intent to actively engage with and contribute meaningfully to the region.<sup>5</sup> India, already acknowledged as a dependable and eager partner in the Indo-Pacific, finds in this an excellent opportunity to broaden the scope of bilateral engagement. The ‘special strategic partnership’ between the two has been steadily advancing, as they find common ground<sup>6</sup> between New Delhi’s Act East policy (AEP) and Seoul’s New Southern Policy (NSP). The Indo-Pacific policies

of both countries present ideal intersections for fostering broader and more significant cooperation.

As India and South Korea increasingly recognise the strategic significance of the Indo-Pacific, both nations have been actively formulating their respective strategies for the region, driven by shared concerns over stability, economic prosperity, and maritime security. Despite their geographical distance, India and South Korea find themselves converging on several key principles and interests within this framework.

“The India-South Korea partnership has a pivotal position in the Indo-Pacific, with their distinct maritime landscapes, their own formidable geopolitical capacities, and focused foreign-policy orientations.”



# India's Indo-Pacific Vision

The term 'Indo-Pacific' emerged in the lexicon of geostrategic studies in the 2000s, gaining diplomatic references since 2010, albeit intermittently.<sup>7</sup> The pivotal moment in articulating India's approach towards this region came during the prime minister's address at the 2018 Shangri-La Dialogue.<sup>8</sup> The speech emphasised several key themes: a 'free, open, and inclusive' region; a 'free and open' maritime order; strategic balance; freedom of navigation; a rules-based global order; and adherence to international law. Importantly, it underscored that India's existing and prospective partnerships were not meant as 'containment' alliances.<sup>9</sup>

India's vision for the Indo-Pacific region is anchored to a desire for an open, inclusive, and rules-based order—one that not only respects the sovereignty of all nations, regardless of their size, but also ensures the free flow of commerce and navigation. At the heart of this vision lies the importance of connectivity, underpinned by respect for international laws and norms.

One of the prominent articulations of India's stance towards the region is the 'Act East Policy'. This policy, an evolved version of the earlier 'Look East Policy', manifests India's proactive efforts to fortify its relationships with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and its member countries, as well as with other powers in the larger East Asia. It seeks to amplify economic cooperation, foster cultural ties, and develop strategic collaborations. The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), comprising the United States (US), Japan, Australia, and India, further underscores India's commitment to a secure and prosperous Indo-Pacific. While informal, the coalition holds strategic weight and India's push was a major impetus in reviving the platform. Indeed, particularly since the COVID-19 pandemic, the Quad has been one of the most active and successful plurilaterals in recent years in activities such as collaborating on vaccines and strengthening regional security. The grouping is also important for revitalising regional supply chain diversification and in that respect, Seoul is poised to provide economic and technological assistance as a Quad Plus member<sup>10</sup> while emphasising the collective vision of the member nations for a free, open, and inclusive region.

Primary of the guiding principles of India's Indo-Pacific vision is freedom of navigation, especially given the criticality of the sea routes in the region for global trade. India asserts that the maritime domain remains free from artificial hindrances and respects the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea

# India's Indo-Pacific Vision

(UNCLOS). Open connectivity champions the development of infrastructure that adheres to globally recognised standards and does not burden nations with untenable debt. Finally, respect for the rule of law underpins India's approach, emphasising the sovereign rights of all nations, non-aggression, and peaceful dispute resolution.

New Delhi's Indo-Pacific vision seeks to foster a climate of mutual respect, shared prosperity, and collective security in one of the world's most dynamic and critical regions and has also been demonstrated during India's G20 Presidency in 2023. New Delhi reiterates that its policy is not targeted against any specific actor, even as it has not hesitated to critique parties that appear to contravene its avowed values. Therefore, while India is hesitant to see regional groupings as exclusive clubs, it is enthusiastic about fostering constructive partnerships across the spectrum. This nuanced approach aligns with the belief that while concerns about Beijing are driving the expansion of cooperative networks in the region, the collaborative agenda must be positive rather than hasty for these networks to be sustainable.<sup>11</sup>

“At the heart of India's Indo-Pacific vision is connectivity, underpinned by respect for international laws and norms.”



# South Korea's New Southern Policy (NSP) and Indo-Pacific Strategy

South Korea's New Southern Policy (NSP) is in many ways a natural precursor to its Indo-Pacific strategy released in December 2022. The NSP symbolises its strategic pivot towards Southeast Asia and India, emphasising deeper ties, collaboration, and cooperation. Introduced during the tenure of President Moon Jae-in (2017-2022), the NSP is a testament to South Korea's ambition to diversify its diplomatic and economic engagements and reduce its over-reliance on major powers. The NSP is built on three pillars: People, Peace, and Prosperity. Each serves a specific purpose in South Korea's broader geopolitical and socio-economic aspirations (see Table 1).

**Table 1: Pillars of ROK's New Southern Policy**

| People  | Peace  | Prosperity  |
|---|--|---|
| This pillar aims to intensify interpersonal connections and cultural exchanges. The focus is not only on fostering people-to-people ties but also on nurturing mutual understanding and cultural appreciation. South Korea envisions multiplying mutual tourist visits, simplifying visa processes, and promoting educational exchanges to instil deeper cultural familiarity and affinity. | Given the complex security dynamics of the Indo-Pacific region, South Korea's emphasis on the 'Peace' pillar is a clear commitment to regional stability. This involves collaborative endeavours in defence, combating transnational challenges such as terrorism, piracy, and climate change, and ensuring freedom of navigation. By championing peace, South Korea reiterates its role as a responsible regional stakeholder, upholding the principles of non-aggression and peaceful conflict resolution. | Economic collaboration stands at the core of the Prosperity pillar. This extends beyond traditional trade to include technology transfers, collaborative R&D, infrastructure projects, and the digital economy. South Korea is keen on leveraging its technological prowess and industrial might to tap into the burgeoning markets of Southeast Asia and India, ensuring mutual economic benefits. |

Source: Author's own

In its essence, the NSP reflects South Korea's strategic recalibration, prioritising its neighbours in its south as critical partners. As the geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific region rapidly evolve, the NSP serves as South Korea's

# South Korea's New Southern Policy (NSP) and Indo-Pacific Strategy

blueprint for fostering a balanced, inclusive, and harmonious regional order, with the aim of nurturing a future where collaboration over competition is the guiding mantra.

The Indo-Pacific Strategy emerged as a natural extension of the NSP. South Korea, as a key player in East Asia, recognised the growing interconnectivity between the Indian and Pacific Oceans. This connectivity underpinned economic activities, maritime security, and geopolitical dynamics. It is a testament to its evolving foreign policy and its ambitions in playing a pivotal role in regional dynamics. At its core, this strategy is an attempt by Seoul to navigate the complex geopolitical terrain marked by global powers like the US and China which have competing visions for the Indo-Pacific.

The strategy document notes that first, freedom, peace, and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific region are crucial for global well-being; achieving these goals necessitates enhanced cooperation among countries within and outside the region through the strengthening of the rules-based order and the harmonious co-existence and prosperity of diverse nations in the Indo-Pacific. Second, it underscores that the ROK aspires to be a 'global pivotal state' and is committed to playing a more substantial role in the region. It also aims to leverage the potential of the 7.3 million Korean expatriates who could contribute to fulfilling the region's ambitions. Third, it confirms that the ROK is dedicated to close collaboration with all nations, aligning with the shared objectives and principles outlined in the Indo-Pacific strategies of various countries.

Fourth, to advance this vision, the ROK government's relevant ministries will develop detailed implementation plans based on this Indo-Pacific Strategy, with a focus on nine priority areas. Additionally, specific policy initiatives for individual sub-regions like the Korea-ASEAN Solidarity Initiative will be meticulously formulated. These efforts aim to bolster the coherence and predictability of ROK's foreign policy and expand the scope of its partnerships.

South Korea's strategy also underscores its commitment to promoting regional stability and cooperation. After all, the Indo-Pacific region is home to critical maritime chokepoints, like the Strait of Malacca, which are essential for global trade. By actively participating in the region, South Korea aims to contribute to maritime security, ensuring the free flow of trade, on which its export-driven economy heavily relies. Moreover, the strategy allows South Korea to foster deeper ties with ASEAN countries and India, who are all emerging as



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influential players in the regional balance of power. By cultivating relationships with them, South Korea seeks to not only diversify its economic and diplomatic partnerships but also to bridge the global powers, thus reinforcing its role in regional diplomacy.

Lastly, the significance of South Korea's Indo-Pacific strategy can also be understood in the context of North Korea. By bolstering partnerships in the Indo-Pacific, Seoul can potentially garner more support and collaboration in its efforts to handle the North Korea issue, ensuring that it remains high on the regional agenda.

“ROK seeks to navigate the complex geopolitical terrain of the Indo-Pacific marked by the competing visions of global powers like the US and China.”

# Key Areas of Convergence

India holds a pivotal role in the South Asian region in Seoul’s Indo-Pacific strategy. New Delhi is the most fitting choice for Seoul’s outreach towards South Asia. India stands out as a natural choice for South Korea, not only due to its strides in digital economy and development but also because it is a democratic nation with strong economic capabilities and a resolute political will. The strategy document<sup>12</sup> acknowledges India as a leading regional partner with shared values and maps out a course of action for elevating the strategic alliance with India. It recognises that India holds immense potential for development, boasting the world’s second-largest population and standing at the forefront of IT and space technologies. South Korea therefore aims to intensify strategic dialogue and collaboration through elevated diplomatic and defence-level interactions; alongside fortifying the groundwork for expanded economic partnership by enhancing the ROK-India Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA).

It was also in 2004, the year the foundation for strategic ties was built, that the Indian Maritime Doctrine indicated a notable transition in global maritime priorities, shifting from the Atlantic-Pacific to the Pacific-Indian region. Consequently, extending beyond the confines of the Indian Ocean, the Western Pacific has long been recognised as a domain of significant security interest for India.<sup>13</sup> At the inaugural meeting of the International Financial Architecture working group within the G20 in January, the South Korean delegation emphasised that India embodies not only hard power, evidenced by its substantial economy and population, but also possesses considerable soft-power capabilities.<sup>14</sup>

**Table 2: Key Points of Convergence**

|                        |  |
|------------------------|--|
| Geopolitical Alignment | Both India and South Korea are committed to upholding a rules-based international order in the Indo-Pacific. They share concerns over challenges such as territorial disputes, freedom of navigation, and the need to prevent any single hegemonic power from dominating the region. |
| Security Cooperation   | Both countries recognise the importance of robust security partnerships to maintain peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific. This includes joint military exercises, information sharing, and collaborative efforts to combat transnational threats like piracy and terrorism.       |
| Economic Interests     | India and South Korea are notable players in the global economy, and both have a strong interest in promoting economic integration and connectivity in the Indo-Pacific. They aim to leverage their economic strengths to support development, trade, and investment in the region.  |



# Key Areas of Convergence

|                                       |  |
|---------------------------------------|--|
| Infrastructure Development            | India's 'Act East' policy and South Korea's 'New Southern Policy' both emphasise the development of critical infrastructure in the Indo-Pacific. This includes ports, roads, and other connectivity projects that aim to enhance regional integration and economic growth.     |
| Cultural and Educational Exchanges    | India and South Korea share a deep appreciation for cultural exchanges and educational collaboration. This serves to strengthen people-to-people ties, fostering a deeper understanding between the two nations.   |
| Environmental Stewardship             | Both India and South Korea recognise the importance of sustainable development and environmental conservation in the Indo-Pacific. They aim to work together on initiatives related to clean energy, climate change mitigation, and protection of marine resources.            |
| Multilateralism and Regional Forums   | India and South Korea actively participate in various regional forums and multilateral organisations related to the Indo-Pacific. These include ASEAN-led mechanisms, the Quad, and the East Asia Summit. They seek to use these platforms to further their shared objectives. |
| Technology and Innovation             | Both nations have thriving technology sectors and see the Indo-Pacific as a space for technological collaboration. This includes areas like artificial intelligence, cybersecurity, and emerging technologies, where they can complement each other's strengths.               |
| Balancing Relations with Major Powers | India and South Korea maintain balanced relationships with powers in the Indo-Pacific, such as the United States and China. They aim to engage constructively with all stakeholders while safeguarding their own strategic interests.  |

Source: Author's own

- **Geopolitical Alignment**

India and South Korea find common ground in their commitment to upholding a rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific. This shared objective stems from their mutual recognition of the importance of stability and security for the prosperity of the region. Both nations are concerned about potential disruptions to the established norms of international behaviour, such as territorial disputes, aggressive maritime claims, and challenges to freedom of navigation. Both countries emphasise the principles of international law, including the UNCLOS,

# Key Areas of Convergence

as a fundamental framework for resolving maritime disputes. They advocate for peaceful, diplomatic solutions and reject the use of force or coercion to settle territorial claims.

India and South Korea's convergence on these geopolitical principles is evident in their active participation in regional forums and multilateral organisations. They engage in discussions and initiatives aimed at strengthening regional security mechanisms, such as ASEAN-led platforms, which provide avenues for dialogue and cooperation among Indo-Pacific nations.

By aligning their geopolitical perspectives, India and South Korea aim to contribute to a stable environment in the Indo-Pacific. This not only serves their own national interests but also benefits the international community by fostering an atmosphere conducive to economic growth, development, and peaceful co-existence. Together, they work towards ensuring that the Indo-Pacific remains a region characterised by respect for international norms and the rule of law.

- **Infrastructure Development**

India and South Korea both place emphasis on infrastructure development as a cornerstone of their Indo-Pacific strategies. Recognising the critical role that connectivity plays in fostering economic growth and regional integration, the two nations are actively involved in initiatives aimed at building and upgrading infrastructure in the Indo-Pacific region.

Ports are a key component of this infrastructure drive. India and South Korea are investing in the expansion and modernisation of ports, recognising them as vital nodes for maritime trade and economic activity. By developing world-class port facilities, they aim to facilitate smoother and more efficient movement of goods within the region and beyond. Additionally, both countries are exploring the potential for joint infrastructure projects in the Indo-Pacific. Collaborative efforts in constructing ports, roads, and other connectivity-related ventures not only bolster economic ties but also deepen the strategic partnership between India and South Korea.



# Key Areas of Convergence

The strategy of the current administration under President Yoon Suk Yeol includes the establishment of a robust supply chain to facilitate the nation's exports and imports, supported by the necessary digital infrastructure, automated ports, and eco-friendly autonomous vessels. These efforts will be complemented by the development of a reliable distribution network, achieved by expanding the transportation capabilities of South Korea-flagged ships and securing overseas distribution hubs such as ports and distribution centres.<sup>15</sup>

To realise this vision, the government is poised to make significant investments in maritime economic and technological advancements. Agreements are already in effect for collaboration in shipbuilding, an area often regarded as a missed opportunity in the Indian maritime sector, both in terms of defence and commercial applications, given South Korea's advanced technological expertise in this domain. Ongoing projects for the modernisation of naval shipbuilding,<sup>16</sup> in collaboration with Hindustan Shipyard Ltd. and Korea Shipyard, along with the exchange of LNG shipbuilding technology<sup>17</sup> between Korea's STX Offshore and Shipbuilding Co. and GAIL India Ltd., exemplify this cooperative effort. Beyond operational collaboration and capacity-building, there exist additional promising avenues for strengthening maritime cooperation. These encompass search and rescue operations, maritime domain awareness, combating marine pollution, humanitarian aid and disaster relief, counterterrorism and anti-trafficking, preventing marine pollution, and anti-piracy activities.<sup>18</sup>

Furthermore, the emphasis on infrastructure aligns with broader regional efforts to enhance connectivity. Initiatives like the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC) and the Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity (MPAC) provide frameworks for cooperative infrastructure development, bringing together nations with shared interests in fostering regional prosperity and stability.

- **Multilateralism and Regional Forums**

Seoul and New Delhi share a keen interest in and are well-positioned to establish issue-based interactions within regional cooperation frameworks like ASEAN, the Indian Ocean Rim Association, and the Quad. There is potential for both informal and formal configurations of function-oriented and sector-specific multilateral cooperation. ROK has demonstrated a strong interest in engaging with the Quad, particularly during the pandemic, and it is likely to continue actively participating in the Quad-Plus arrangement, potentially

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leading to full membership. Within the Indo-Pacific context, domains of collaboration include resilient supply chains, climate action, emerging and critical technologies, global health, sustainable infrastructure, and connectivity. All of these are fundamentally supported by the advancement of maritime security cooperation.<sup>19</sup>

India and South Korea recognise the value of multilateralism and active participation in regional forums as essential components of their Indo-Pacific strategies. Both nations understand that addressing complex challenges in the region requires collective efforts and a platform for constructive dialogue. A key forum in which India and South Korea engage is the ASEAN, which is central to the geopolitical landscape of the Indo-Pacific. India and South Korea actively participate in ASEAN-led initiatives on a wide range of issues, including economic development, security, and cultural exchanges.

India and South Korea are also both members of the East Asia Summit (EAS). This forum provides an opportunity for leaders in the Asia-Pacific to engage in open and inclusive discussions on various strategic, political, and economic matters. Through the EAS, India and South Korea can contribute their perspectives on regional challenges and work towards collective solutions.

- **Balancing Relations with Major Powers**

India and South Korea are pursuing a nuanced approach to managing their relationships with powers in the Indo-Pacific, such as the United States and China. Both nations recognise the importance of engaging constructively with these influential actors while safeguarding their own strategic interests and autonomy.

In their engagement with the US, India and South Korea share a commitment to promoting a free and open Indo-Pacific. They value their strategic partnerships with the US as a means to enhance regional stability, security, and economic prosperity. India, in particular, has deepened its defence cooperation with the US, participating in joint military exercises, sharing intelligence, and cooperating on defence technology. South Korea, while maintaining a strong economic relationship with the US, also seeks to enhance its security ties, including through defence consultations and joint exercises.

# Key Areas of Convergence

Under Yoon's leadership, South Korea is moving swiftly to ensure its continued status as a crucial security ally of the US in the region. It seeks to work with the democratic and strategically aligned nations of the Indo-Pacific while leveraging its strengths to effectively address regional concerns and demands.<sup>20</sup> For Seoul, diversifying its regional partnerships beyond its immediate associations with the US, Japan, Russia, and China has become imperative due to the uncertainties stemming from the rivalry between the US and China. Additionally, Seoul's bitter experiences with China's retaliatory economic measures<sup>21</sup> following its agreement to host the US Terminal High Altitude Area Defense missile defence system underscore the need for a more diversified network of partners.

Furthermore, India and South Korea are proponents of a multilateral approach to managing regional affairs. They advocate for inclusive dialogue and collaboration through platforms like the Quad, ASEAN-led mechanisms, and regional forums. These engagements serve as avenues for constructive discussions with global powers and other regional stakeholders on issues of common interest, such as security, economic development, and environmental sustainability.

“India and ROK both recognise multilateralism and active participation in regional forums as essential to their Indo-Pacific strategies.”

# Considerations in the India-South Korea Indo-Pacific Partnership

While the convergence of India and South Korea in the Indo-Pacific region holds promise, the path is not without its challenges.

First, Seoul has demonstrated, under the current administration, its interest in developing relations with both Washington and its immediate but historically estranged neighbour, Tokyo. Indeed, for years, China's strategic influence in Northeast Asia was rooted in the discord between Japan and South Korea. This seems to be gradually changing.<sup>22</sup> The trilateral gathering of Japan, South Korea and the US at Camp David in August<sup>23</sup> represents a fundamental shift in this dynamic, signalling a departure from previous equations and dispelling any doubts about Tokyo and Seoul's potential for strategic alignment. The extended deterrence and security provided by the US presents mutual benefits for both Japan and South Korea, encompassing a wide perimeter in the Pacific theatre from the South Pacific to the Far East.<sup>24</sup>

For Seoul, however, managing its relationship with China, on the one hand, and with the US on the other is a nuanced challenge. South Korea has substantial economic ties with China, making it critical for Seoul to maintain a delicate balance in its collaborations. India, for its part, also navigates a complex relationship with China marked by border disputes and economic competition, and has been vocal about Beijing's transgressions. The China factor would therefore continue to impinge on bilateral ties alongside their respective developments in ties with Washington.

Second, South Korea's position and preoccupation concerning North Korea is an inevitability and an important consideration. While India maintains a neutral stance in the Cross-Strait relations, any joint security measures in the region could complicate Seoul's efforts at diplomacy and reconciliation with Pyongyang. Third, although there is potential in India and South Korea's economic relations, certain barriers impede seamless trade. Differences in regulatory standards, tariffs, and bureaucratic procedures can stymie the growth potential of economic relations. Addressing these requires sustained negotiations and possibly recalibrating domestic policies.



# Considerations in the India-South Korea Indo-Pacific Partnership

It is appropriate to note that the New Delhi-Seoul partnership in the context of the geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific is still at a nascent stage. Yet, both acknowledge the potential of what their partnership bilaterally as well as through participation in various multilateral groupings can achieve for the Indo-Pacific. Both countries should therefore focus their energies on expanding their strategic partnership, deepening economic and technological collaboration and building supportive domestic constituencies.

Policy convergences between India and South Korea in the Indo-Pacific serve as a compelling model for like-minded nations seeking to navigate the complexities of the region. Their ability to leverage their unique strengths, whether it be India's strategic location or South Korea's technological prowess, underscores the power of cooperative diplomacy in addressing shared challenges. As the Indo-Pacific continues to evolve, this strategic partnership stands to not only bolster regional stability but also contribute to the broader global discourse on maintaining a rules-based international order. [ORF](#)

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