



## FRAMING AN INDO-PACIFIC NARRATIVE IN INDIA-SOUTH KOREA TIES

By Dr. Jagannath P. Panda

**Abstract**

Both India's and South Korea's strategic choices are deeply influenced by the rapidly evolving Indo-Pacific construct, particularly amid a mounting U.S.-China rivalry. With India's "Look/Act East" policy and South Korea's "New Southern Policy" offering a perfect stage for deepened mutual cooperation, both nations need to further their relations to build Asia's future while advancing their respective national interests. With both countries following stringent foreign policies as a result of the actions of their immediate neighbors, they present a geopolitically strategic complementarity for their relationship to prosper and emerge as one of the most important relationships in the region. Seoul's hesitation to overtly embrace the "Indo-Pacific" concept is not really a barrier; rather a geo-political overture to discard the balance of power politics and pursue an autonomous foreign policy. India's preference for the "Indo-Pacific" is equally based on strategic autonomy, imbibing universal values and an inclusive regional order. Both countries emphasize a free and rules-based Indo-Pacific and have immense potential to establish security and connectivity partnerships as the keystone of their bilateral ties. With India and South Korea understanding the economic importance versus security ramifications of China, and with Japan's reemergence as a key regional, if not global actor, both countries need to bring serious strategic intent to their relationship. Making use of the ASEAN platform and bilateral dialogues, South Korea and India have the potential to become one of the strongest Indo-Pacific partners of the 21st century.

**Key Words:** *India, South Korea, Act East Policy, New Southern Policy, Indo-Pacific, Connectivity*

India-South Korea relations are rarely drawn on the same parallel as that of other relationships in Asia such as India-China, India-Japan and Japan-China relations. Yet, it is a relationship of strategic significance that holds utmost relevance to Asia's future, particularly to a liberal international economic order. As two of the top fifteen economies in the world by GDP, India and South Korea constitute two power centers in South Asia and Northeast Asia, respectively. The behavioral patterns of their immediate neighbors have encouraged them to pursue a cautiously prudent foreign policy, forming an attraction between the two countries. China's behavioral patterns have always come as a strategic barrier between South Asia and Northeast Asia.<sup>1</sup> If South Korea's strategic choices are deeply influenced by North Korea and China, India's strategic choices are equally influenced by Pakistan and China. Their prospective ambition to view each other as potential economic partners outside the prism of larger powers such as the United States, China and Japan, generates an Indo-Pacific platform to reckon with. Officially termed as "Special Strategic Partnership,"<sup>2</sup> the foundation of India-South Korea relationship is based on shared democratic values promoting a free-market economy with a commitment to promote a "free, open, inclusive and rules-based" region, congruent with the Indo-Pacific narrative.

With ambitions to promote the "Asian Century" in line with their shared interests in a rapidly evolving Indo-Pacific order, India and South Korea foresee their relationship as a "future oriented partnership" that will be focused on *people, prosperity* and *peace*, as their July 2018 Joint Statement pledges.<sup>3</sup> Though there

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is much room to promote such a partnership, to what extent the relationship will imbue a regional outlook is yet to be seen as the relationship is still primarily a bilateral one. Cooperation in areas such as defense, trade and investment, and people-to-people exchanges are becoming the prime drivers of the relationship, but these are focused more on the bilateral level rather than regional level.

This paper seeks to analyze the scope and strength of regionalizing the India-South Korea relationship in a rapidly evolving Indo-Pacific architecture. The paper argues that India-South Korea ties currently lack strategic substance to become a more a regionally-focused relationship, even though the official “Special Strategic Partnership” characterization has broader aims. In order to acquire and develop a greater regional outlook in the relationship, Seoul needs to embrace the realities of an evolving Indo-Pacific to partner with India as much as New Delhi needs to exemplify Seoul as being of “special” and “strategic” importance on par with Japan and China. This paper further argues that the ASEAN region could be the bonding constituency between India and South Korea regionally, especially when their 2018 *Joint Statement* proposes a “tripartite partnership for development in third countries,”<sup>4</sup> fusing India’s “Act East Policy” (AEP) and South Korea’s “New Southern Policy” (NSP).

### Embracing the Indo-Pacific Realities

The notion of the Indo-Pacific has not been highly featured in India-South Korea official statements. The latest *Joint Statement* released on July 10, 2018 only passingly acknowledges that South Korea accords to India’s “inclusive and cooperative vision” in the Indo-Pacific region.<sup>5</sup> Such a transient mention is not without a reason: it expounds Seoul’s difficulty of subscribing to the notion of an Indo-Pacific strategy which would exemplify an anti-China narrative in a tightly contested regional theater. In other words, South Korea foresees India more as a partner in the region and endorses India’s inclusiveness without committing to any sort of coalition framework. Their mutual endorsement of a relationship within the three p’s— “people, prosperity and peace”—explicates their strategic intent to pursue bilateral oriented ties, eschewing regional complexities. The emphasis on peace denotes an understanding to stay away from conflict or politics in the region, while people and prosperity imply both countries need to pursue an economic-oriented relationship. This draws on complementarities between India’s Act East Policy (AEP) and South Korea’s New Southern Policy (NSP).<sup>6</sup>

### South Korea’s India Reach

Under President Moon Jae-in, Seoul has been just as focused on Southeast Asia as it has been on Northeast Asia. The “Northeast Asia Plus Community for Responsibility-sharing” (NEAPC) replicates South Korea’s traditional concern of managing relations with immediate neighbors as well as allies focusing on peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula. While “permanent peace” and building a “new economic map” are the two overarching aspects of Moon’s foreign policy on the Korean Peninsula, consolidating partnerships are the other hallmark of his two other foreign policy strategies—the “New Northern Policy” (NNP) and the “New Southern Policy” (NSP). Strengthening partnerships with Russia, Mongolia, and Central Asian countries are the main primacies of the NNP. The NSP outlines a more independent and action-oriented approach towards ASEAN as well as outreach towards India, reflecting a search for new economic partnerships amidst allies and adversaries in the region.<sup>7</sup> The NNP exhibits a management strategy that covers Seoul’s key relationships by exploring new economic opportunities in Northeast Asia.

To view India as a potential economic partner is a strategic necessity for South Korea even though Korean companies are old guards in the Indian market. Seoul’s foreign policy has excessively depended on two major economies—the United States and China. India, as one of the largest emerging economies, is now an alternate choice for South Korea. Forging stronger economic ties with India has further become a strategic necessity given current tensions with Japan. Besides, to meet the challenges arising from the Fourth Industrial Revolution, Seoul is continuously searching for partners to sustain its trading economy and India naturally emerges as a preferred partner as a rising economy.<sup>8</sup> In this regard, trade and economic relations between India and South Korea have slowly improved since the implementation of the Comprehensive Economic Partnership (CEPA) free trade agreement in 2010.<sup>9</sup> India and South Korea have further started to upgrade their partnership, as agreed in the 2015 summit meeting.<sup>10</sup> In 2018, during the state visit of the South Korean President to India, eleven documents and MoUs were signed on a variety of topics like technology, trade and upgrading CEPA.<sup>11</sup> Trade between India and South Korea, however, stood at only \$21.5 billion last year, requiring a substantial amount of effort to reach the \$50 billion targeted by both countries.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, South Korea also realizes that technological innovation can contribute hugely to sustaining its economic growth and collaborative efforts for technological innovation is a strategic necessity.<sup>13</sup>



Hence, Moon's current focus is on how to expedite the manufacturing base to reenergize innovative growth in the South Korean economy.<sup>14</sup> India's flagship projects such as "Skill India," "Make in India," "Digital India," "Start-up India," "Smart Cities" and "Ayushman Bharat" could be areas to tap for greater collaboration. South Korean companies are intensifying their strategic search and looking for new modes of investment opportunities in emerging economies. They deem a rising India as a good destination for their investment-related ventures. While existing South Korean companies in India are mounting their businesses, a great number of new companies are seeking to enter the Indian market as soon as possible. India must benefit from this opportunity to augment the presence of South Korean companies in India through government-sponsored initiatives. In fact, the two sides have signed an agreement to continue operations of Korea Plus which facilitates investments by Korean companies in India.<sup>15</sup> The two also plan to promote collaborative start-ups, mainly a Korea Start-up Centre (KSG) in India to encourage cooperative ideas, technologies, and promote designing of future start-ups.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, South Korean ambition is based on the rationale that the high-skilled labor force in India could emerge as a potential base for Korean manufacturing and tech companies. South Korea's highly developed shipping, steel, nuclear energy, and heavy electrical machinery industries could also find India as a good place to invest.

As a trading economy, Seoul's aim has always been how to closely integrate its own economy with the regional one. A successful and early conclusion of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) has been a top priority for South Korea, since it remains key to South Korea's vision of a regional trade order.<sup>17</sup> Thus, for South Korea, both the NNP and NSP touch upon the necessary strategic components that the Indo-Pacific region deals with. Seoul might be restrained in openly endorsing the 'Indo-Pacific' concept since it has to tread carefully between a tightly contested China-led and US-led regional environment. This has certainly not discouraged Seoul from factoring India and ASEAN as the main pillars for its regional foreign policy embodied by the NSP.<sup>18</sup>

Above all, the growing US-China trade tensions and South Korea's renewed tensions with Japan should make India an even more attractive alternative regional partner in Seoul's foreign policy. As the fourth largest economy in Asia, Seoul heavily relies on exports to two of the world's largest economies, the United States and China. South Korea's reliance on China—both as its

top export destination and largest trading partner—leaves it greatly exposed to the ongoing US-China trade conflict.<sup>19</sup> South Korean exports could be reduced as much as \$1.3 billion a year.<sup>20</sup> Beijing imports a large volume of semi-conductors from South Korea, assembles them into smartphones and electronic goods, and then sends them to the United States. The trade war is likely to negatively impact this dynamic with China and thus could hurt the Korean economy, making ASEAN and India more attractive as destinations for future exports. The current trade conflict between Japan and South Korea will likely similarly encourage Seoul to turn to India and ASEAN as alternative economic partners.<sup>21</sup>

#### *Seoul in India's Eastern Reach*

To India, South Korea is an important partner in its Act East Policy (AEP) framework. Built on India's previous ASEAN-focused "Look East Policy" (LEP), AEP first looked to strengthen India's ties with China and Japan. A "Special Strategic Partnership" with South Korea expedited India's economic and strategic outreach in the Far East, offering a new face to the AEP. Furthermore, South Korea has emerged as a key strategic partner in India's Indo-Pacific construct, as Prime Minister Narendra Modi noted in his June 2018 Shangri-La dialogue speech:

To the East, the Malacca Strait and South China Sea connect India to the Pacific and to most of our major partners—ASEAN, Japan, Republic of Korea, China and the Americas. Our trade in the region is growing rapidly. And, a significant part of our overseas investments flow in this direction. ASEAN alone accounts for over 20%.<sup>22</sup>

Grouping South Korea with other important powers in Indo-Pacific was not an ordinary statement by an Indian Prime Minister. Rather, it explained the strategic weight India accords to South Korea in its panoramic Indo-Pacific strategic vision alongside other significant actors.

Modi's speech replicates a new horizon in India's foreign policy where South Korea is certainly taken more seriously. With an acknowledgement to "Inclusiveness, openness, and ASEAN centrality" as the core to India's Indo-Pacific construct, New Delhi currently envisions building stronger trilateral economic cooperation by factoring connectivity and infrastructure development as the main pillars of this engagement. Japan has steadily emerged as a strong actor in this regard. South Korea could be one of the most important third-party actors as well, drawing on the complementarities that India's AEP and South Korea's NSP offers to their bilateral relations in the ASEAN



region. Stronger relations with South Korea in the ASEAN-centric regional architecture focusing on connectivity and infrastructure building could be the main basis of cooperation.

The changing character of Indian foreign policy will factor South Korea as a more prominent partner than ever in a tightly balanced regional environment. While New Delhi has welcomed most of the China-backed multilateral schemes by partaking in them, such as the Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the New Development Bank (NDB) of the BRICS, it has equally opposed unilateral Chinese schemes such as the Belt and Road Initiatives (BRI) and China-sponsored RCEP—signifying skepticism towards a China-centric regional security order. Likewise, a “global strategic partnership” between India and the United States is undeniably strengthening the liberal values and norms in the Indo-Pacific. Yet, this global strategic partnership does not necessarily recount an Indian-envisioned security architecture that will entirely endorse a US-led order.<sup>23</sup> And, certainly improving its relationship with the United States does not mean that India is willing to retreat from building its relationship with other actors in the region, including China. Indeed, strengthening the relationship with the United States complements India-South Korea relations, especially taking into consideration the U.S.-South Korea alliance. Furthermore, Indian foreign policy has adopted a ‘multi-alignment’ strategy with a focus on ‘multipolar Asia’ in which South Korea is seen as a vital partner. As Prime Minister Modi stated in his Second Raisina Dialogue speech on January 17, 2017:

The multi-polarity of the world, and an increasingly multi-polar Asia, is a dominant fact today. And, we welcome it.<sup>24</sup>

Given the increasing uncertainty and shifts in the region such as the ongoing U.S.-China trade conflict, the South Korea-Japan tensions, and the rapid execution of China’s BRI, India must employ a strategy of purposeful engagement in Asia and beyond where South Korea should emerge as a stronger partner than before. India must make an effort to convince South Korea that its decision not to be a part of the RCEP negotiation deal is based on India’s national interest. A principal feature of India’s Act East Policy has been to establish a strategic consonance with the regional trading environment through the RCEP negotiations.<sup>25</sup> Accepting RCEP in its current form would have led to a further increase in the already huge trade deficit India has with the RCEP constituent members. More importantly, India joining RCEP in its

current form will offer a strategic fillip to China to dictate the regional trading environment. Besides, India’s decision to not be a part of RCEP is not a reset of its growing ties with South Korea. Rather, such an Indian decision should allow both sides to have a more purposive dialogue in the evolving regional economic environment.

### Between U.S.-backed and China-backed Regional Architecture

The rise of China and the subsequent churning tensions with the United States has resulted in a power struggle throughout the Indo-Pacific region. Countries are faced with a strategic choice between the United States and China. Stuck between two contradictory views of the Indo-Pacific, both India and South Korea are trying to avoid being abandoned by their partners and allies, while trapped amidst the rivalry between the US and China.

Under its Indo-Pacific Strategy, the United States is endorsing regional cooperation with principles of openness, inclusiveness, and transparency. Its concept of a “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” has been the successor to the Obama administration’s “Pivot to Asia.”<sup>26</sup> While these principles align with those of India and South Korea, neither country officially endorses the US-led regional order, even though Seoul is an integral part of the US-led regional order. U.S. initiatives such as the Asia Reassurance Initiative Act (ARIA) of 2018 show Washington’s commitment to treaty allies in the region like South Korea and highlight strategic partnership with India, calling for “the strengthening and broadening of diplomatic, economic, and security ties between the United States and India.”<sup>27</sup> Further, U.S. initiatives such as the BUILD Act and the Indo-Pacific Transparency Initiative Act are ensuring economic cooperation with likeminded countries such as India and South Korea in the region.<sup>28</sup>

In this regard, a prosperous South Korea regards its economic development and security as tied to the liberal international order, which endorses freedom of trade, navigation, and communication. Further, there is a visible convergence between South Korea’s “New Southern Policy” and the US’ Indo-Pacific Strategy, and their alliance framework has much to do in this regard. This was reiterated in the joint press conference earlier this year between both the nations where Seoul



officially supported the Indo-Pacific Strategy for the first time. Moon stated:

We've reached a consensus to put forth further harmonious cooperation between South Korea's New Southern Policy and the United States' Indo-Pacific strategy.<sup>29</sup>

In this context, it is viable for South Korea to endorse a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific." However, the United States' Indo-Pacific Strategy centers around containing China, which South Korea wishes to avoid. Though, not necessarily backing BRI, Seoul cannot overlook Beijing as its biggest trading partner. South Korea also acknowledges China's role in the international sanctions regime against North Korea and its crucial role in ensuring a peaceful backyard for Seoul. In other words, Beijing's participation is key to a peaceful Korean Peninsula, along with the rest of the international community, which Seoul will find hard to ignore.<sup>30</sup>

On similar lines, the United States' strategy places considerable importance on India. The Indo-Pacific Strategy expresses the common perspectives of India and the US towards the region while realizing the growing prospects of bilateral cooperation between the two countries towards a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific." The United States puts India on par with its closest allies by acknowledging it as one its "major defense partners" and establishing the US-India 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue. The growing trade tensions between India and the US comes as a setback while the Trump administration rescinds India's developing country status under its General System of Preferences. Further, even as this development would only affect 10% of Indian exports, the bilateral relationship—despite numerous dialogues, engagements and military exercise—has not achieved the level of cooperation initially envisioned.<sup>31</sup> While India perceives the United States as a strong military and strategic partner, it is significant to understand that India does not completely endorse a U.S.-led regional order.<sup>32</sup> India acknowledges the anti-China perception in the U.S. strategy, but also perceives China as a bilateral and multilateral partner. This view was reiterated by Prime Minister Narendra Modi's speech in the Shangri-La Dialogue in 2018,<sup>33</sup> where he refused to subscribe to the notion of an exclusive Indo-Pacific, catering to limited members. Instead, India's vision of the Indo-Pacific is an inclusive one, that includes both China and Russia, while not having strategic consonance with the perceptions of the U.S.

Furthermore, the US "free and open" Indo-Pacific strategy is based on building strategic partnerships that complement its strategic

alliances in Asia, especially under the Trump administration's "America First" foreign policy. This approach diverges from India's vision for the regional order in which India means to preserve strategic autonomy through its strategic partnerships without necessarily complementing the U.S. strategic alliance framework. The U.S.-led regional order does little to endorse the interests of emerging powers or middle powers.<sup>34</sup> With a focus on strategic autonomy, India has maintained multiple levels of networks with countries in trilateral and quadrilateral formats. Envisioning engagement with South Korea in similar modes of networks could be another basis of India-South Korea cooperation.

India-South Korea relations must also overcome the strategic barriers that the region poses to their prospective ties. A challenge from China and its sponsored scheme is one strong factor. Even though China has not formally put forward an Indo-Pacific strategy, most of Xi Jinping's foreign policy outreach is Indo-Pacific centric. The new National Defence Strategy of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) has changed the strategy from focussing on the Pacific Ocean to concentrating on the Pacific and Indian Ocean.<sup>35</sup> The new Defence White Paper released in 2019 also offers a similar focus on maritime domains.<sup>36</sup> In this context, the Indo-Pacific is becoming a cornerstone of China's global outreach. Besides, China has described its strategy for increasing its influence in Asia under the rubric of "Asia for Asians."<sup>37</sup> Through such a proposition, China aims to bolster its global outreach in fields of diplomacy, economics, and security, while diminishing the role of the US. This vision includes two of China's ambitious initiatives—the AIIB and BRI.<sup>38</sup> In recent times, India's regional vision has not been entirely contradictory to that of the China-backed initiatives in Asia and beyond. For some time, India has been charting an inclusive order in Asia, with a focus on economic development, infrastructure, and sustainable development. This was reiterated during a recent speech at the third annual Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) meeting in Mumbai, where Modi stressed the importance of continued engagement with China and the AIIB under a "developmental partnership" for sustainable infrastructure development in India and Asia.<sup>39</sup> In this context, India seeks to nurture its regional partnership with China, not discard it.

Further, the Mamallapuram Informal Summit, Wuhan Informal Summit, and Xiamen meeting between Modi and Chinese President Xi Jinping in 2019, 2018, and 2017, respectively, has enabled India-China relations to be envisioned as a development partnership where infrastructure cooperation is pitched to be a



critical aspect of cooperation. This has been reiterated through India's encouragement of Chinese companies to invest in India under its "Make in India" initiative. From this perspective, India is wary of being perceived as supporting an anti-China conception in the Indo-Pacific. India does not want to evade its gaining momentum in its relationship with China.<sup>40</sup> However, India also remains wary of China's deceptive regional architecture in Asia where it pursues a soft foreign policy to promote developmental partnerships, while also exhibiting a heavy reliance on military coercion to enforce its claims over land and maritime territories in the region.

On similar lines, while South Korea will not abandon China as an important economic partner, a rising China and its growing strategic influence in Asia has posed a greater challenge for Seoul, encouraging it to search for alternative partners. China's economic retaliation against South Korea in the wake of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) missile defense deployment further pushed Seoul to search for new partners that may bring strategic assurance to its partnerships in Asia. It is therefore important to note that India and South Korea remain fairly independent as actors in the Indo-Pacific region, determining their synergy. Their middle power status garners the support of emerging powers while ensuring a level of multilateral interactions. Seoul has positioned India as a prospective partner in its bilateral framework in Asia, if not in the world.

Both sides must realize that an India-South Korea partnership in Asia could be based on a fresh and an attractive multilateral mode of partnership that may grow without debt burdens, over reliance and sustainable economic partnership. Besides, such a partnership through the respective Act East and New Southern policies can provide an alternative international cooperation option, without moving away from the U.S. or China. Also, their overlapping interests could lead to cooperation on infrastructure building, where both India and South Korea have proven their international competency by building roads, energy grids, airports, and ports, etc. Such a relationship could also factor into issues such as maritime security; free and safe navigation; making an effort to address piracy, smuggling, and human trafficking in the region; and promoting humanitarian assistance and disaster relief.<sup>41</sup>

### A Connectivity Direction

The significance of connectivity infrastructure is congruently being recognized as an important factor for enhancing the India-

South Korea relationship. This has been reflected in Seoul's perception of India as an alternative choice for serving as an engine for South Korea's economic growth. Such a perception was necessitated in Moon Jae-in's statement during his visit to India in 2018 where he was quoted stating that:

Although we had pushed for a cooperation strategy with the Southeast Asian countries as a single package, I believe we now need to push for a strategy that fits all countries and separate strategies that fit the characteristic of each different country.<sup>42</sup>

On similar lines, the Korean government agreed to provide India with \$10 billion to support India's priority infrastructure sectors in 2015. This raised optimism, encouraged greater cooperation between on infrastructural connectivity, and provided greater significance to the Special Strategic Partnership.<sup>43</sup>

Further on connectivity, India, and South Korea agreed to boost their bilateral ties through building ports and shipping space, which would further provide Indian seafarers employment on over 500 Korean ships. This development was a result of the Indian Shipping, Road Transport & Highways, Water Resources, River Development & Ganga Rejuvenation Minister Nitin Gadkari's visit to South Korea in 2018 which also opened the gates for potential partnerships in shipbuilding, waterways and smart transportation. He was viewed stating:

We are also looking to have partnership in the field of ship building, smart transportation system, water conservation & recycling, eco-friendly energy system for marine industries and technology to develop our rivers to drive economic growth.<sup>44</sup>

This development strengthened the memorandum of understanding between both the nations which allowed for cooperation and mutual assistance to facilitate the development of ports, port-related industries, and the maritime relationship.<sup>45</sup>

Furthermore, the notion of Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) which was introduced by Prime Minister Modi in 2015 also plays a great role in enhancing the India-South Korea partnership. This initiative has been key to India's maritime vision, translating India's role in the Indo-Pacific as a constructive leader which looks beyond India's immediate neighborhood and is committed to maritime security and infrastructure cooperation.<sup>46</sup> Most recently, Prime Minister Modi proposed an "Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative" for a sustainable maritime environment at the 14<sup>th</sup> East Asia Summit (EAS) in Bangkok.<sup>47</sup> South Korea can



be an important connectivity partner to India in these maritime initiatives. India, through these investments, is trying to provide an alternative maritime investment environment to the Chinese BRI, especially to Beijing's Maritime Silk Road (MSR). India aims to tackle various types of maritime security challenges in the region which have been emerging through unilateral and autarkic connectivity initiatives.

Along similar lines, the Moon Administration's New Northern and New Southern policies are also intended to be independent of Chinese goals and priorities. Their aim is cooperating with nations—especially with the middle powers—amidst the growing geopolitical uncertainty in the region.<sup>48</sup> It is in this regard important to note that despite joining the BRI, South Korea does not have a single collaborative project under the initiative. Diplomatic rows with China such as the deployment of THAAD have also hampered economic ties between both nations. This is along similar lines of India's perception of the BRI, which New Delhi condemns due to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) passing through the region of Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (PoK), and because of a range of other issues pertaining to transparency and universalism.

Another platform to enhance India-South Korea connectivity can be the AIIB. Though primarily a China-backed bank, India is one of the founding members of the AIIB and has been one of its largest borrowers for infrastructural projects in areas of transportation, water supply, telecommunications, sanitation, rural and urban development, power, and energy.<sup>49</sup> Similarly, South Korea too has been one of the founding members of the Multilateral Development Bank (MDC) and has pledged \$8 million for AIIB's special fund for enhancing infrastructure in developing countries.<sup>50</sup> South Korea also co-hosted AIIB's flagship annual meeting in 2017 which was centered on the theme of "sustainable infrastructure."<sup>51</sup> These developments highlight the synergies and commitment between India and South Korea towards connectivity infrastructure. Most notably, India and South Korea's positive inclination to engage with the AIIB has encouraged both nations to approach each other as development partners. In this regard, AIIB can act as an excellent platform for greater partnership between India and South Korea.

Subsequently, India and South Korea consider connectivity as an instrument to ensure peace, security, and development in Indo-Pacific. India has time and again considered the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) as a great platform towards this end.<sup>52</sup> India has been considerably supportive towards the invigoration

of IORA activities, including the blue economy and renewable energy. The focus of the IORA on maritime safety and security has been promoting a shared understanding of maritime issues and helping develop cooperative mechanisms with partner countries.<sup>53</sup> South Korea is also seeking to collaborate on connectivity projects, making Seoul a potential viable partner in the IORA.<sup>54</sup> Further, during South Korea's foreign minister's visit to India in 2018, she expressed the intent to work with India in forums such as IORA.<sup>55</sup> This reiterates the willingness of the two sides to work together in multilateral forums and need for the momentum to be used to facilitate greater strategic cooperation between both the countries.

However, such potential for partnerships between India and South Korea are still not being realized. While diplomatic, economic, cultural and defense ties are developing, both nations still need to take advantage of the opportunity of a potential budding partnership based on connectivity. Special attention also should be given to developing strategic relations between both the countries. An upgraded security and connectivity partnership would enhance both nations' strategic leverage in the Indo-Pacific region. Relations with South Korea should be considered similarly as the relationship with Japan has been in recent years to tackle growing unilateral efforts by China.<sup>56</sup> Thus, there is a scope for India and South Korea to act and cooperate as natural partners and work together closely to foster peace and stability in the region.

### ASEAN-Plus Tripartite Cooperation

Unlike India-Japan relations, India-South Korea relations have never figured ASEAN exclusively as a zone of cooperation. Much of the complementarities drawn between India's AEP and South Korea's NSP are based on the assertion of regional cooperation, factoring countries in Southeast Asia and the ASEAN as an institution. Still, an objective appraisal of cooperation featuring the ASEAN-led architecture has not really emerged between the two countries even though both have endorsed a "rules-based and inclusive regional architecture"<sup>57</sup> where ASEAN is poised to play a constructive role. On the part of South Korea, it is trying to match China and Japan in the region by developing comprehensive relations with ASEAN.<sup>58</sup> The NSP is aimed at accelerating South Korea-ASEAN cooperation.<sup>59</sup>

Mitigating the challenges from Chinese economic coercion and uncertainties arising out of U.S. President Donald Trump's unpredictable policies is the real motivating factor behind



the Moon government’s NSP.<sup>60</sup> To reduce dependence on major actors, the NSP is more of an economic and diplomatic diversification strategy to build ASEAN and India as alternate economic base.<sup>61</sup> It is aimed at strengthening South Korea’s regional standing while maintaining strategic autonomy amidst the US-China rivalry. The combination of ASEAN and India is seen as the “next China” in South Korean policy circles.<sup>62</sup> In order to meet the Chinese and Japanese challenge on infrastructure and connectivity projects, South Korea has grouped ASEAN and India together, similar to the way Japan has grouped different sub-regions under its “free and open Indo-Pacific” outlook. A synergy to this effect is evident in India’s AEP. New Delhi views ASEAN as a means to expedite its trade and economic cooperation.

India and South Korea endorse an ASEAN connectivity cooperation vision that could be the basis of their regional cooperation through the Act East Policy and New Southern Policy. For instance, South Korea has recently developed a platform for cooperation with the ASEAN Connectivity Coordinating Committee (ACCC).<sup>63</sup> This platform can discuss forging greater regional connectivity by bringing together South Korean and Indian connectivity initiatives. Since 2013, India has been regularly engaging with ASEAN to discuss connectivity initiatives under the ACCC-India Meeting.<sup>64</sup> It is important to note that the ACCC-India meeting has been instrumental for the progress of the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway, the Rhi-Tiddim Road Project, and the Kaladan Multimodal Project (Map 1).<sup>65</sup> South Korea, on

Map 1. India-Myanmar Major Connectivity Projects



Source: GIS Lab, IDSA.



the other hand, has invested in projects such as the new light rail transit system in Jakarta and upgrading its cooperative relationship with Vietnam to a “comprehensive partnership” by investing Vietnam’s infrastructure—including road and airport construction projects etc.<sup>66</sup> This conjunction builds a strategic context for a greater India-South Korea connectivity cooperation by partnering on projects in ASEAN.

Subsequently, the ASEAN-ROK 2017-2020 action plan stresses partnership, connectivity, sustainable infrastructure development, and human-centered development.<sup>67</sup> These areas of cooperation, mainly connectivity initiatives, are equally visible in India’s approach regarding the Mekong region. India’s ambition to expand the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway to Cambodia and Lao is strong evidence of this.<sup>68</sup> This proposed connectivity highway project could be one area of cooperation between India and South Korea in the ASEAN region.

For connectivity and infrastructure development, greater regional economic frameworks such as RCEP as well as multilateral mechanisms like the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting (ADMM) plus could bring India and South Korea together through ASEAN. While Moon has yet to endorse the concept of Indo-Pacific, South Korea’s foray into the Indo-Pacific region is due to its strategic interests. A clear signal of this was Indian naval ships reaching Busan, South Korea for a joint exercise in April 2019 under the ADMM plus.<sup>69</sup> This signifies the Indian Navy’s growing outreach in the Indo-Pacific, while also following a larger trend of growing cooperation between India and South Korea through regional platforms. Further, South Korea’s commitment to connectivity and sustainable development was visible when its foreign ministry lead the ARF inter-sessional meeting on disaster relief, proposing enhanced connectivity

between disaster risk reduction and sustainable development as a priority for cooperation.<sup>70</sup> Such initiatives can bring both India and South Korea into close cooperation to enhance infrastructural connectivity and sustainable development.

## Conclusion

India and South Korea need to position each other as “key strategic partners” in their respective Act East and New Southern policies. Most importantly, the policies should not be rhetoric, but must be practical and substantive to forge a stronger India-South Korea partnership. This relationship therefore needs to be crafted within a framework which is not just bilateral, but contains significant regional deliberation. A sense of urgency is required to upgrade the strategic partnership to the regional level.

A stronger India-South Korea envisioned regional partnership will undoubtedly face a China challenge. Despite tensions between New Delhi and Beijing, India-China relations are rapidly moving towards becoming more development-oriented. This has the potential to pose an enormous challenge to South Korea’s outreach in India. More than the India-China ties, it is the India-Japan “special” partnership that the India-South Korea relationship will have to compete with. Japan’s emergence as a strong investor in India’s infrastructure development program—especially for connectivity projects in Northeast India with an ambition to connect with neighboring Southeast Asian countries—constitutes a challenge for a potential India-South Korea ties. Therefore, a greater political understanding, closer defense partnership, and solid economic ties with South Korea need to be envisioned in India while exploring each other’s policies to the fullest in Indo-Pacific realities.



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