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Exploring the Strategic Partnership Between India and South Korea

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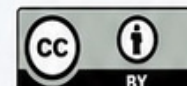


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Abstract

India and South Korea have a strategic partnership built over decades of efforts based on democratic principles and strategic interests. This article analyses successes and gaps in the strategic partnership across crucial sectors such as economic, defence, and maritime security. Over the years, partnership has expanded institutionally, though strategic depth remains uneven. One crucial factor becoming significant is that both countries are approaching the Indo-Pacific Region, intending to maintain a rules-based international order. Hence, questions can be raised about whether India- ROK cooperation is keeping pace with the rapidly evolving Indo Pacific security environment. In this regard, India's newly launched MAHASAGAR (Mutual and Holistic Advancement for Security and Growth Across Regions), which is a renewed version of SAGAR Doctrine¹ aligns with South Korea's New Southern Policy and its Indo-Pacific Strategy.²

To ensure freedom of navigation and collective maritime security and development, both countries are collaborating through joint navy exercises, coordinated anti-piracy efforts, and port development initiatives. Also, at present, given shared vulnerabilities in safeguarding ships and undersea cables, both countries are in a position to have active engagement in the International Maritime Organization. The findings raised concerns, particularly in terms of time efficiency and red tape. Several changes are required to improve the bilateral relationship. With the need to leverage mutual strengths and aspirations to fortify bilateral relations, faster decision making and project level outcomes is need of the hour.

Introduction

“It is only natural that India and Korea - democracies sharing similar values, aspirations, and capacities - strengthen their ties through political, defense, strategic, and economic cooperation within the Indo-Pacific realm.”

In 2025, India and the Republic of Korea accomplished the tenth anniversary of their special strategic partnership, which was established in 2015.³ The milestone of forming a strategic partnership presents an opportunity to look into the success and gaps in the development of the partnership between the two nations. Also, it becomes important to assess whether the bilateral partnership is capable of transitioning from symbolic alignment to operational cooperation. Back in 2024, during a joint commission meeting hosted by India after a gap of six years, South Korea's Foreign Minister emphasized the alignment between India and South Korea. The anti-piracy efforts, port visits by Indian naval ships to South Korean ports, and vice versa showcase the alignment and commitment to cooperation. However, as this type of engagement remains episodic, therefore an institutionalized maritime security framework is required, and India is capable of it as it does have arrangements with other Indo-Pacific partners. Both countries need to work on putting more strategic efforts and utilizing this strategic partnership to bolster maritime presence in the Indo-Pacific Region.

Evolution of Strategic Partnership

Since the 1970s, the India and the Republic of Korea relationship has evolved over time. In 2010, a major milestone was achieved when, during the ROK President's visit to New Delhi, the partnership was designated as a "Strategic Partnership". Significantly, within the span of five years, it was elevated to the status of 'Special Strategic Partnership' in 2015 during the Indian PM's visit to Seoul.⁴ In 2018, for the first time, the concept of Indo-Pacific emerged in bilateral relations between the two nations, when a joint statement, during the ROK President Moon Jae-in's visit to India, mentioned that both nations committed to establishing "a peaceful, stable, secure, free, open, inclusive, and rules-based region".⁵ Here, it also becomes crucial how both countries define Indo-Pacific, as in the case of India, India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi articulated that India's vision of Indo-Pacific extends "from the shores of East Africa to the shores of the Americas", emphasizing the promotion of a democratic and rules-based international order, where nations of all sizes thrive equally and sovereignty.⁶ This articulation clearly reflects India's outlook towards the Indo-Pacific Region. In the case of the Republic of Korea, its approach to Indo-Pacific is influenced by American perspectives and is outlined in its Indo-Pacific Strategy. Nevertheless,

both India and the Republic of Korea maintained a view of Indo-Pacific with emphasis on a peaceful and cooperative regional environment. Yet, with limited joint initiatives over a decade, convergence has remained largely normative rather than converting into sustained strategic security cooperation.

Shipbuilding and security collaboration

As India lies at the centre of the Indo-Pacific Region, it needs to strengthen its navy fleet along with bilateral relationship with littoral states of Indo Pacific Region. In the Past, when Piracy used to be the main concern, India and South Korea collaborated several times. One such effort was an anti-piracy operation in the Gulf of Aden in 2017. These types of efforts show the country's dedication to the protection of essential maritime trade routes, crucial for the smooth functioning of world trade passing through the region.⁷ But the absence of regular joint deployments puts a limit on long term strategic impact of such operations.

In the area of shipbuilding, the current Indian government's focus is visible in the steps taken in recent years. South Korea, which has a cutting-edge shipbuilding sector holding the top position in the world, can enhance India's manufacturing capabilities through collaboration with private companies. However, India failed to translate collaboration with South Korea's companies due to issues in local sourcing and regulatory delays. In recent years, the South Korean government and companies have showcased interest in investing in India's shipbuilding sector. Back in 2023, South Korea's HSL Company signed an INR 16000 crores contract with the Ministry of Defence. This project supported the production of five fleet support ships designated for the Indian Navy. Recent talks by South Korean companies enhancing collaboration with Cochin Shipyard Limited are in line with India's efforts to build up its own shipbuilding sector, with the aim of becoming one of the world's top ten shipbuilding nations by 2030.

Both countries are middle powers with independent policies; India's Act East policy and South Korea's Indo-Pacific Strategy have brought both countries closer in terms of economic and security collaboration. Both countries have some of the crucial agreements in terms of security, for example, in the field of defence, both countries agreed to share classified military information,

particularly nuclear proliferation activities of North Korea and Pakistan. Apart from Shipbuilding and security, the space sector, where India has a lead, can also be another area of potential for mutual gains. South Korea's expertise in electronics systems with advanced technologies, combining India's cost-effective space capabilities, could create complementarities beyond maritime alone.

Indo-Pacific Policy and Mutual Interests

"We are both exemplary democracies, vibrant economies, and cultural powers, and we are both committed to contributing to a free, open, peaceful, and prosperous Indo-Pacific region," stated Park Jin, the Foreign Minister of the Republic of Korea.⁸

In 2022, the Republic of Korea introduced its Indo-Pacific Strategy, aiming to improve collaboration in the Indo-Pacific region. ROK's strategy with priorities of maintaining an international rule-based border based on inclusivity and cooperation in key areas align closely with India's MAHASAGAR doctrine principles. Emphasis on fostering inclusivity in the Indo-Pacific region, with ensuring freedom of navigation, adherence to international law amid increasing militarization of regional waters, is crucial for both countries.⁹

Due to geographical distance, India, with its western extremity, and South Korea, with its eastern extremity, remained widely less connected on the policy front in the past, though both countries acknowledge the significance that the Indo-Pacific Region holds and the responsibility that both countries have to perform. In recent years, India and the Republic of Korea's engagements in multilateral forums like the Quad Plus dialogue and the East Asia Summit conference on maritime security and cooperation underscore both middle powers' role in a secure and stable Indo-Pacific region.¹⁰ India and South Korea case serves as a test case for middle powers shaping regional order amid great power rivalry.

Undersea cables, Maritime law and governance

In the present age, economies of every nation is dependent on internet. The internet connectivity relies on undersea cables, and these undersea cables have come under threat as surge in cases of damage to undersea cables are reported in different parts of the world. Collective efforts are required at international level, as with time rebels will try to possess technology to damage undersea cables targeting countries data security and economic stability. As of 2025, where talks on maritime security are gaining momentum, a comprehensive international legal framework capable of holding perpetrators responsible remains absent.¹¹

South Korea and India both are well positioned in International Maritime Organization (IMO), as South Korea comes under Category A member, and India under Category B member. India's recent re-election to the IMO Council situates India among the ten states with the most substantial interest in International seaborne trade. Notably, South Korea enjoys an advantage within IMO, as its Kitack Lim served for eight years as secretary general; during this period, he facilitated critical discussions related to maritime security.¹² At a time when both countries' economies are digitally oriented, damage to undersea cables will have immediate effects on the economy. Though the undersea cable protection issue remains underexplored between the countries, it must be brought up as a critical area of cooperation.

Future Ahead

India and the Republic of Korea are in a Special strategic partnership; however, many gaps persist in utilizing this partnership. South Korean investments in the automobile and electronics sectors in India remained successful with Hyundai, KIA, and others. In areas like shipbuilding, space, and the defence sectors, collaboration opportunities remain limited due to many reasons. The Indian government needs to work on solving the issues of the bureaucratic hurdles, slow progress on Memorandums of understanding, time efficiency in production capacities, and others, to revive the long-term partnership through reforms. In December 2025, India was reelected to the IMO Council for the 2026-27 period with the highest votes for its second consecutive term.¹³ This re-election underscores India's rising maritime influence in the maritime area. This comes at a time when China is asserting its power in the South China Sea, and US-China tensions in recent days are

becoming a hurdle for global growth. Therefore, India and South Korea can leverage their strengths for mutual gains and should focus on exploring investment opportunities in new areas like Space, Artificial Intelligence, and semiconductors.¹⁴

Endnotes

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