

South Korea in India' s Indo-Pacific Vision: Impressions post-Moon Jae-In' s Visit

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India' s foreign policy architecture in Indo-Pacific is witnessing continuous advancements. A case in point is the growing bonhomie with South Korea (officially known as the Republic of Korea). With Moon Jae-In' s recent visit to India from 8- 11 July 2018, New Delhi' s “Act East” policy was enriched with South Korea emerging as a stronger and a much potential economic partner.

To begin with, a new political context was built between the two countries when Moon Jae-In met Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi along with a range of high-level leaders from political and business communities to strengthen the low-key India-South Korea partnership. Emphasizing the three P' s of people, prosperity, and peace, both India and South Korea pledged for a “peaceful, stable, secure, free, open, inclusive and rule-based region” to enhance their future partnership. Such a partnership with South Korea is advantageous for strengthening of India' s foreign policy. The basis of this futuristic partnership is to establish a greater strategic consonance between India' s “Act East” policy and South Korea' s “New Southern Policy” (NSP) factoring both the countries as important components for each other. The recent visit witnessed both sides agreeing in several areas to cooperate. Policies for People-to-people contact, supporting mutual economic growth and upgrading the South Korea-India Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) to realize the goal of achieving a targeted bilateral trade by 50 billion US Dollar by 2030 were projected. Another highlight of Moon' s visit to India was an attempt to understand and meet the challenges arising from the fourth industrial revolution.

Seoul in India's Strategic Outlook

From South Korea's perspective, Moon Jae-In's NSP views India as a potential economic partner and a necessary strategic alternative, enhancing its foreign policy beyond Northeast Asia. This will also help South Korea move away from its excessive dependence on China and the USA. India too regarded Moon's visit as an opportunity to enhance its engagement with South Korea, an important country in Northeast Asia or in Far East. A new political context is set for both the countries to stake a claim in the Indo-Pacific. While strengthening Modi's Act East Policy, Moon's visit has certainly set the stage for further cooperation. Yet, it needs to be seen how India can prioritize its relationship with South Korea in a rapidly changing Indo-Pacific environment. In other words, how does India view South Korea as a partner in contrast to its relationship with Japan and China?

India's perspective on South Korea depicts New Delhi's changing foreign policy outlook in the Indo-Pacific at present. A reflection of this Indo-Pacific outlook is aptly reflected in Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's speech at the Shangri La dialogue on June 1, 2018. Modi eloquently said: "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". This strategy is based on a fine blend of India's political, economic and institutional outreach with mainstream countries along with the ASEAN. Likewise, New Delhi would like to nurture a comprehensive partnership with South Korea across the spectrum, primarily focusing on trade and economic contacts. The challenge is how to accord priority to South Korea when Seoul is refusing to completely embrace the concept of Indo-Pacific. Moreover, India finds greater strategic compatibility with Japan than South Korea, both bilaterally and regionally.

Eleven Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) were signed between the two sides during Moon's visit, indicating an emphasis towards a more economic-centric stance with an emphasis on infrastructure development. The immediate priority is to facilitate the trade liberalization process through the India-South Korea Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA). The agenda shall be to nurture their relationship in areas such as research collaboration in railways, technological cooperation, bio-technology, artificial intelligence, cultural exchanges, information and communication technology (ICT), defense, scientific research collaboration to agricultural cooperation etc. Cooperation in these areas will undoubtedly serve as a good coverage for their overall bilateral cooperation. India's expectation from South Korea however goes much beyond securing bilateral contact.

Beyond Bilateralism

To put it directly, Moon's visit might have given a fresh context to India-South Korea bilateral relations; yet it has failed to develop a context where India can possibly establish a greater strategic consonance with Seoul which is reflected in the Joint Statement. Unlike the previous Joint Statement, this newly released document does not put much emphasis on security and strategic understanding between them in a regional and global framework. The very mention of the three P's as the overarching theme of India-South Korea future relations explains the gap that exists in Indian and South Korean perception of addressing regional security, especially in the Indo-Pacific context. This is a setback since India-South Korea relations in 2015 was designed as a "Special Strategic Partnership" where their cooperation interests extended beyond finite bilateral issues. It envisioned some consequential regional and global ambitions that necessitated India-South Korea strategic cooperation.

The latest statement moreover, is very short and concrete; it is completely ignorant of the new nuances of regional and global politics where the two countries actually had scope to cooperate. To India's disadvantage, engagement with South Korea might stay restricted to a mere economic partnership, overlooking their scope for regional engagement. The document officially states that both India and South Korea will explore a "tripartite partnership" with third countries, possibly starting in Afghanistan. This is a positive development, though given the volume of the two countries' economies, there is vast potential for much more.

The views and spirits expressed in the new Joint Statement is certainly fitting to both India's and South Korea's foreign policy approach in a complex regional architecture since both pursue a pragmatic and careful foreign relations strategy. Yet, a closer look at it does not really offer an encouraging sign of a shared vision. The Joint Statement only uses the word "Indo-Pacific" passingly, "ROK took note of India's inclusive and cooperative vision for the Indo-Pacific region". This implies South Korea acknowledges the concept but is hesitant to embrace it. This is a discouraging sign for India-South Korea ambitions, considering China's assertive emergence in the Indo-Pacific region. Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has become an influential unilateral aspect of Chinese diplomacy, creating fissures in the geo-politics of the region. In this regard, India-Japan relations are striving towards a greater regional and global status on key issues such as connectivity, corridors, infrastructure etc. Ideally, India would expect to cooperate with South Korea to balance out China's mega connectivity and corridor infrastructural projects, but that unfortunately is falling short.

Reviving the Historical Foothold

Additionally, India's expectation from South Korea would be much greater in the Northeast Asian peace process than what is being anticipated. India is a non-critical actor in Northeast Asia. Neither was New Delhi a part of the Six-Party talks meant to address Korea's nuclear issues, nor has it ever been directly involved in the Korean Peninsular politics after the Korean War in the 1950s. If anything, India has tried to reach out to both the Koreas (North and South) under its "Look/Act East" policy paradigm. The Geographical distance between India and Northeast Asia, and New Delhi not being a permanent member (P-5) of the UNSC have always restricted India's pursuits. Nevertheless, by welcoming the inter-Korean summit held on 27 April in Panmunjom, India had officially aspired for better inter-Korean engagement to diffuse the existing tensions. By advocating "dialogue and diplomacy" - the real basis of "peace" and "reconciliation" in the Korean Peninsula - India has further reaffirmed the significance of a resolution of the nuclear issues in the Peninsula for addressing the "proliferation linkages" in the region.

The post-Panmunjom summit offers new diplomatic opportunities for India to pursue Korean affairs more vigorously. The Trump administration advocates "complete, verifiable, and irreversible" denuclearisation in the Korean Peninsula. Though the process of "complete denuclearisation" and permanent peace in the Korean Peninsula is far-fetched and questionable, India can find it expedient for itself. Its demand for addressing the "proliferation network" here has merit; complete denuclearisation would not only require dismantling the nuclear sites to which Pyongyang has informally agreed to but would also permanently cease the "proliferation network" that North Korea shares with Pakistan, possibly with China's support. This should encourage India to bring forth a meaningful India-US constructive dialogue, following the June 2017 Joint Statement released between India and the US, concerning North Korea's nuclear weapons. To take this forward, New Delhi should promptly establish strategic consonance with South Korea.

Furthermore, with Donald Trump-Kim Jong-Un meet in Singapore, a "no isolation" and "no regime collapse" scenario in Pyongyang has fast emerged. Kim's meeting with the Chinese President Xi Jinping, with President Moon Jae-in and the meeting with President Donald Trump exemplify this. Singapore hosting the Trump-Kim meet also implied that the world is more open to engaging with North Korea with an open mind. Truth be told, India's strategic understanding with the United States on global affairs and New Delhi's cordial relations with both South and North Korea should have encouraged New Delhi to convince the United States (US), the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) and the Republic of Korea (ROK) to host such a historic meeting between Trump and Kim. Nevertheless, India is viewing these developments positively to support and play a bigger role under the UN mandate to address the humanitarian issues including the reconstruction of North Korea's economy. This was further exemplified by India's Minister of

state for External Affairs, V.K Singh, in his visit to North Korea recently. A greater understanding with Seoul on North Korean issues will be beneficial for India-South Korea partnership.

More importantly, the “no war-like scenario” that has emerged after the Panmunjom summit must encourage India to aspire to position better in the Korean Peninsula to promote peace, stability and harmony, even support the far-fetched prospect of unification of the two Koreas. India wants to revive its image as a major power in the Korean Corridor, reminding the world of the persuasive role India played in the 1950s during the Korean War period. India's historical role in the successful nine-member UN Commission established to hold elections in post-independence Korea in 1945, which marked the formal establishment of the Republic of Korea (ROK) is a strong testimony to this effect. North Korea and South Korea accepting the India-sponsored resolution to end the Korean War, with a declaration of ceasefire on 27 July 1953 - further epitomises India's potential. China and the United States might act as roadblocks in supporting this. But the moment is expedient for India to revive its historical role as a peace builder, especially with the Panmunjom declaration heralding a “new era” of national reconciliation, peace and prosperity between the two Koreas. Furthermore, South Korea's Independence Day, 15 August 1948, coincides with India's. This must encourage both India and South Korea to revisit their historical bonhomie.

Above all, India must enhance its strategic channel of communication with South Korea. The new Joint Statement released on 10 July 2018 recognises India's historical association in contributing to the peace process in Korean Peninsula during the Korean War period. Both the countries discussed the prospects of denuclearisation during Moon's recent visit to India. Yet, a concrete action plan on how India can play a greater role in Korean Peninsula under the current scenario and to what extent South Korea wants an Indian role in the region remain unclear. If an India-South Korea cooperation on the peace process in Korean Peninsula has to be established, both need to penetrate their strategic understanding deeper into a new “Northeast Asia plus” foreign policy to be led by Moon Jae-in. Moon's responsible and cooperative foreign policy is the key behind the third Panmunjom inter-Korean summit. Seoul's current foreign policy act of carefully manoeuvring between China and the United States is working much effectively, even though its decision not to remove the THAAD has left Beijing unconvinced of Seoul's approach in restoring peace in the region.

Nevertheless, New Delhi can use this moment expediently, considering that South Korea's “Northeast Asia plus” foreign policy factors India strongly as a partnering country along with ASEAN under its “New Southern Policy Initiative”. This would be in consonance with Moon Jae-in's intent which is to promote South Korea's foreign policy prism to the Indo-Pacific region without formally acknowledging the word “Indo-Pacific”. This is in line with Seoul moving away from its conventional Northeast Asia-centric policy, with a more purposeful economic engagement with India and ASEAN. India should therefore seek advantage through a stronger relationship with

South Korea within the overall arch of its Act East policy.

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