

Creating a Resilient Indo-Pacific Region: Analyzing India and South Korea's Defense Cooperation

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Structured Abstract

Article Type: Research Paper

Purpose—The Indo-Pacific region's geopolitical climate is fluctuating due to the contestation between the U.S. and China. Amid this, the region is observing a quiet shift and increasing engagement between states whose interests align. India and South Korea have emerged as like-minded states practicing a balanced foreign policy in the region, as they face similar challenges and share values and respect for a rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific region. This research paper focuses on analyzing the defense cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region undertaken by India and South Korea with each other and other states.

Design, Methodology, Approach—This paper has used content analysis as an approach.

Findings—With the great power competition between the U.S. and China growing in severity, the overspilling of the security competition in the Indo-Pacific region will make the regional contest more bipolar, forcing countries to rethink their national security and defense. States like India and South Korea will find it challenging to align entirely with either major power, as doing so restricts their strategic autonomy and constrains their economic interests. The contesting space between the U.S. and China restricts the scope of maneuvering for countries that wish to practice strategic autonomy, like ASEAN members and earlier non-aligned countries. Such geopolitical polarization gives India and South Korea space to emerge as legitimate alternatives to significant powers as partners in strengthening their defenses—in other words, a better, safer alternative choice to cooperate

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in strengthening their defenses. Therefore, India and South Korea must strengthen the Indo-Pacific region's defense security by collaborating, cooperating, and creating an alternative avenue for countries that also share goals of upholding, protecting, and maintaining the region's stability, yet avoiding the great power rivalry.

Practical Implications—This paper argues that “like-minded countries,” here India and South Korea, can work together and strengthen cooperation in the defense sector to bring stability and ensure the region's prosperity by avoiding getting drawn into great power contestation in the region.

Keywords: cooperation, defense, India, Indo-Pacific, South Korea

I. Introduction

The Indo-Pacific region has gained traction in the contemporary geopolitical game due to the U.S.–China political contest. The rise of the Indo-Pacific concept lies at the center of the contemporary power shift happening in the world. The change from Asia-Pacific to Indo-Pacific signifies the elevation of strategic considerations because of the focus on traditional security, particularly maritime security. The Indo-Pacific is an amalgamation of different interpretations of states' interests that exist in the contiguous geographical region and beyond in the Indian and Pacific Oceans. It is also a malleable concept that is changing with time and space, giving it more flexibility to adapt to differing perceptions, still with a strong maritime foundation. The Indo-Pacific concept is essentially a maritime concept focused on bringing together the Indian and Pacific Oceans. This concept was evoked by Shinzō Abe as he referred to the coming together of the two seas of prosperity and freedom as the “Confluence of two seas” in his address to the Indian parliament in 2007.¹ However, the concept finds its roots in the work of different scholars. The earliest trace of the Indo-Pacific concept in India was found in the book *India and the Pacific World* by author Kalidas Nag in 1947, where he looked at the connectedness across Asia through the “historical connect and cultural relations.”² Karl Haushofer, a German geopolitical thinker, is another prominent scholar who contributed to the Indo-Pacific concept.³ Visible manifestations of the rising prominence of the Indo-Pacific region include the changing power dynamics in the region, formation of new alignments and realignments, U.S.–China rivalry, and the emerging nexus between security-economic-technological aspects in state strategy. Amid the shifting focus toward the Indo-Pacific region, there is a fear that the new rivalry may give rise to an arms and technology race between the U.S. and China. The rising military power and capabilities of both countries have forced many countries to build military strength. Some countries have leveraged the developing and existing defense manufacturing dedicated to domestic demands to fill the region's requirements. India and South Korea are particularly interested in engaging in the region by selling their military assets and equipment. Both countries see an opportunity to enhance demand by building defense relations with regional states through various mechanisms.

South Korea and India share the perspective of resolving disputes through diplomatic negotiations rooted in international laws and norms. However, both countries want to avoid the strategic dilemma by opposing polarization. India and South

Korea's interests converge in ensuring that the region remains free of great power rivalry because it would force them to take a position risking their national security. India and South Korea want the role of the U.S. to be limited to a strategic stabilizer state rather than starting a new cold war. In this context, both countries have worked with regional "like-minded" states to uphold stability and further economic prosperity. This paper acknowledges that defense cooperation expands beyond the Indo-Pacific region of both countries. However, it has limited the scope of cooperation of India and South Korea to the Indo-Pacific region (geography as stated in their respective Indo-Pacific strategies).

The paper first analyzes the common factors both countries share in expanding defense cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region. This is followed by elaborating on the respective visions of India and South Korea in the Indo-Pacific region. Then it evaluates the application of their respective visions in the region and concludes by tracing the strengthening of India–South Korea cooperation in the defense sector and briefly discussing the possibilities of further collaboration. The research is based on primary sources like state strategies, leaders' speeches, government documents, and secondary sources from think tanks, newspapers, journal articles, and analytical pieces.

II. Defense Cooperation Based on Two Strands: Strategic Stability and Economic Considerations

India and South Korea have followed different approaches in the Indo-Pacific region while cooperating with states on military-tech supplies, strategic stability, and economic benefits. The approaches have two main strands on which cooperation and engagement take place—strategic stability and economic benefits. The strategic stability factor focuses on maintaining stability in the Indo-Pacific region. In other words, this approach focuses on strengthening, modernizing, and enhancing military, technological and research developments with "like-minded" countries in the Indo-Pacific region. The second strand, economic considerations, sees cooperation as creating a sector that adds to the economy's growth. There exists a varied degree of appropriation in the case of both India and South Korea while cooperating in the domain of military-tech. The different approaches followed by both states have been shaped by the new geopolitical developments in their respective region, mainly with the rise of China as the new threatening power. Recently, the Indo-Pacific region has dominated the geopolitical conversation; India and South Korea have tried to leverage the situation to strengthen their military cooperation with states in the region to maintain strategic stability and benefit from economic considerations. The emphasis on strategic stability and economic considerations varies with the foreign policy and strategic visions of both India and South Korea.

2.1 Strategic Stability

As the geopolitical environment in the world is shifting toward a more competitive one due to the rise of China, the consequences of the changing power equation

between the U.S. and China will generate implications for the Indo-Pacific states' military buildup. The world military expenditure surpassed US\$2 trillion for the first time.⁴ The trend in military spending in Asia and Oceania, which amounts to US\$586 billion, increased by 2.5% in 2021 compared to 2020 due mainly to the increase by India and China.⁵ This additional expenditure signals new strategic thinking developing in the Indo-Pacific region states. Among the states in the top ten military expenditures, five are Indo-Pacific states, including China at the second position, followed by India in third and Saudi Arabia, Japan, and South Korea in eighth, ninth, and tenth positions.⁶ Among the top forty states leading the list of military expenditure, 17 are Asian states, including Australia, Iran, Indonesia, Thailand, Taiwan, Singapore, and Israel.⁷ The share of the Indo-Pacific states in the top 15 world-leading military expenditure states is led by China (14%), India (3.6%), Saudi Arabia and Japan (2.6%), South Korea (2.4%), and Australia (1.5%).⁸

In the Indo-Pacific region, the sub-regional trend of military expenditure is dominated by East Asia, which saw an increase in expenditure for the 27th consecutive year and which stood at US\$411 billion in 2021.⁹ Asia and Oceania saw a rise of 0.2% (higher than 2020), an allocation of 6.7% for the military budget as a percentage of total budget.¹⁰ The increasing defense and military expenditures have led to states sharing a common strategic vision in the Indo-Pacific region. The exploration of the common understanding is also due to the need to ensure a balance of power and stability in the region. As the geopolitical environment destabilizes due to the difference in the balance of power and rising insecurity, states that are in a position to bring stability to the region will find ways and mechanisms to do so. India and South Korea share the perspective of a stable and inclusive Indo-Pacific that is not dominated by a great-power rivalry. Both these post-colonial Asian states share the understanding of challenges the states face in the region, such as development, digitization, and modernization. India and South Korea have experienced the fallout of the Cold War and the shrinking space it provides for states to pursue their national interests, hence the understanding that to cooperate and engage with each other and other states in the Indo-Pacific region will ensure that the rising U.S.–China rivalry does not subserve the challenges in the region. India and South Korea agree on the need to maintain a rules-based international order that upholds transparency, inclusiveness, and openness.¹¹ This partnership is based on maintaining regional strategic stability through better and closer cooperation in bilateral, minilateral, and multilateral forums. Driving factors behind the India–South Korea partnership include agreements with “like-minded” countries, emerging defense manufacturing sectors, and growing defense relations. First, amid narrowing space for diplomacy and multilateralism, both countries share, to a certain extent, values of liberal international order and the pursuit of strategic autonomy. Second, they share the same strategic reality—bounded by a nuclear weapons state and located in high-security geography—influencing them to think alike. In other words, India and South Korea share the same geopolitical experiences but in different geography and contexts. Third, the strengthening strategic partnership between the two countries has led to the development of substantial defense relations and is expected to grow further. The growing cooperation between India and South Korea's militaries is also due to a legacy of military cooperation because of their neighbors—Pakistan and North Korea.

In addition, India and South Korea face the same strategic reality—nuclear threat and military confrontation. India faces strategic threats and risks from its neighbors Pakistan and China, and South Korea from North Korea’s emerging nuclear and ballistic weapons program. India and South Korea exercise a different degree of strategic autonomy in their foreign policy. India’s strategic autonomy posture has changed since the Cold War when it pursued a foreign policy of non-alignment to post-Cold War when it adopted multi-alignment that emphasized issue-based cooperation. This approach is based on cultivating better ties with major power centers recognizing the emerging multipolarity. From an alliance perspective, the new Indian foreign policy practice may seem confusing to others. However, what remains at the core is the pursuit of political objectives and maximization of national interests. The Indian approach stands against dividing the world into binaries of good/bad, civilized/uncivilized, and democratic/undemocratic, the template used by the alliance systems, but mainly by great powers who see any diversion from the status quo as a challenge to their authority. India challenges these notions as it understands that if it wants to carve out a space for itself in international relations, it needs to continue focusing on its issues and be an independent voice of reason. Like India’s multi-alignment policy that focuses on diversifying state relations, South Korea’s global pivotal state vision also aims to strengthen relations beyond its immediate region. This shows that irrespective of following different approaches, both countries’ willingness to exercise strategic autonomy allows them to explore partnerships beyond traditional state relations.

2.2 Economic Benefits

As the Indian economy grows, it is likely that military strength will follow the trend, particularly against the backdrop of rising insecurity from its northeastern and north-western neighbors. A common term, “two-front war,” which dominates discourse in strategic circles, points toward the risks India is likely to face in future. Therefore, India recognizes that there lies an opportunity to diversify and modernize its defense inventory, and in particular, to develop and expand its indigenous defense industrial production. The vision is to manufacture and export defense equipment and technology from India through the establishment of Defence Industrial Corridors (DICs), one in Uttar Pradesh (a northern state) and one in Tamil Nadu (a southern state).¹² The benefits these corridors bring are in the form of employment generations vital for India’s prosperity. It is estimated that the two DICs are expected to generate 2.5–3.5 lakh jobs (250,000–350,000).¹³ The opportunities also lie herein for India’s Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) to become reliable and a source of innovation to address the challenges of a knowledge-based economy in industry 4.0.¹⁴ India aims to achieve the target of approximately US\$25 billion, by the end of 2025, including US\$5 billion in defense goods and services in the Aerospace sector.¹⁵ India falls into the Market Type B (Growth Countries) category that has traditionally been dependent on other countries, but with economic growth it now wants to leverage and target defense exports as a tool for economic development.¹⁶ The growth in India’s defense exports can be noted in Table 1, which indicates a linear increase in exports and, simultaneously, the number of authorizations; this shows the convergence between the policy and practice.

Table 1: Defense Exports and Export Authorizations

	2014–15	2015–16	2016–17	2017–18	2018–19	2019–20	2020–21 as on date
Total Export (in Millions of Rs)	19,410	20,590	15,220	46,820	107,460	91,160	57,110
No. of Authorizations Issued	42	241	254	288	668	829	633

The value mentioned includes actual export by DPSUs and value as per authorizations issued by DDP (EPC) to private firms and SCOMET (other than Cat. 6). Source: Ministry of Defense Government of India, “Year End Review—2020 Ministry of Defense,” *PIB Delhi*, January 1, 2021, <https://pib.gov.in/Pressreleaseshare.aspx?PRID=1685437>, accessed May 5, 2023.

India has also taken subsequent decisions to enhance confidence of countries to partner in the defense-tech domain. India has opened defense export offices for Defense PSU like Bharat Electronics Ltd. (BEL) in Vietnam and Myanmar. In addition, India is helping to engage the startup ecosystem in the defense and aerospace sector.¹⁷

Earlier, South Korea was the ninth-largest arms exporter in the world, and its share in the global export markets was 2.7%.¹⁸ However, with the increasing demand for military equipment, it has risen to the eighth-largest exporter in 2022 and aims to be the fourth-largest arms exporter.¹⁹ In 2021, South Korea exported military equipment worth US\$7 billion, compared to US\$5 billion in the previous year, and sales expected to top US\$10 billion in 2022 are now estimated to have reached US\$15–20 billion.²⁰ The country aims to be one of the top defense exporters in five years, transforming domestic demand into an export-oriented industry. The increasing defense exports trend, if continued, may hold enormous potential for the South Korean economy if it can leverage the demand for the next generation of autonomous military assets. South Korea recognizes the importance of the defense sector projects in creating an ecosystem of SMEs that can compete globally and add to its growth. Even fighter jet development generates substantial revenue and economic activity. The KF-21 fighter jet is 65% domestically produced; consists of around 30,000 individual parts; helps almost 700 Korean businesses from SMEs, conglomerates, and middle companies; and the project employs 12,000 direct and 100,000 indirect job opportunities, with a value of 5.9 trillion won.²¹ Such projects help drive the local economy by employing citizens and adding to the economy through the defense exports market.²² In 2017, South Korea exported to 83 countries with 132 exporting companies, totaling about US\$3.1 billion in defense product exports.²³ Table 2 states the economic benefits associated with arms exports. Strengthening relations in defense also gives other countries a stake in South Korea’s security with the additional benefits of high-tech jobs and lower costs due to large-scale manufacturing.

Table 2: South Korean Arms Exports

	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Total Exports in Millions of USD	207	94	480	742	1,056	698	827

Source: Created by the author from the “Arms Exports (SIPRI Trend Indicator Values)—Republic of Korea,” *The World Bank*, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/MS.MIL.XPRT.KD?end=2020>, accessed May 5, 2023.

Defense exports are not just a tool for economic benefit, they also ensure the development of strategic ties between states through military cooperation. These ties aid in building better understanding and enhanced trust between states. The collaboration between like-minded states like India and South Korea as democratic nations helps uphold rules-based order. They share a degree of comfort in working with each other and have similar converging perspectives. In addition, deepening defense cooperation also gives stakes to other states that engage in defense trade for each other's security.

III. India and South Korea's Vision for the Indo-Pacific

3.1 India

India's vision of the Indo-Pacific stands "for a free, open, inclusive region, which embraces all in a common pursuit of progress and prosperity" of the region and is dominated by the strategic interpretation that India has for the region.²⁴ The vision has evolved with time and is shaped by the shifting geopolitical dynamics in the Indo-Pacific region. The Indo-Pacific region is geographically defined by the unity of the Indian and Pacific Oceans. The Indo-Pacific ranges from "the western coast of North America to the eastern shores of Africa ... [and] Southeast Asia is at the center of the Indo-Pacific, with ASEAN architecture assuming a prominent role."²⁵ The unity of both oceans brings with it the understanding and compatibility of like-minded states in the Indo-Pacific region. The like-minded states share a common perspective of the Indo-Pacific region due to their converging interests and aligning strategic visions. India's Indo-Pacific vision aligns with the democratic and developing nations of the region. As stated by India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi at the Shangri-La Dialogue:

We believe that our common prosperity and security require us to evolve, through dialogue, a common rules-based order for the region. And it must equally apply to all individually as well as to the global commons. Such an order must believe in sovereignty and territorial integrity, as well as equality of all nations, irrespective of size and strength. These rules and norms should be based on the consent of all, not on the power of the few. This must be based on faith in dialogue, and not dependence on force. It also means that when nations make international commitments, they must uphold them. This is the foundation of India's faith in multilateralism and regionalism; and, of our principled commitment to rule of law.²⁶

Irrespective of India's Indo-Pacific vision conceptualization, the primary focus of India has been on the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). The IOR is India's sphere of influence, due to which the IOR becomes vital to India's geostrategic interest. India has attributed its vision in the IOR region to SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region). This was stated by PM Modi during the Commissioning of OPV *Barracuda* in Mauritius in 2015, where he stated that

Our goal is to seek a climate of trust and transparency; respect for international maritime rules and norms by all countries; sensitivity to each other's interests; peaceful resolution of maritime issues; and increase in maritime cooperation.²⁷

The SAGAR vision emphasizes that the primary responsibility of peace, stability, and prosperity of the IOR lies with the states that reside in the region. However, India also remains open to the idea of engaging and cooperating with states that reside outside the region, those that are stakeholders in maintaining open sea lanes of communication, and have interest or stakes in the region to work through “dialogue, visits, exercise, capacity building and economic partnership.”²⁸ The IOR is a part of the Indo-Pacific region, and the policy for the region is contextual to its geopolitical realities and geographical proximity to the Indian subcontinent. Besides the IOR, India has proactively cooperated with forums beyond the region into extended neighborhoods with ASEAN-led mechanisms like ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting (ADMM) Plus. At the eighth ADMM Plus meeting, India stated its position for respecting the sovereignty and territorial integrity of nations in the Indo-Pacific region and called for an open and inclusive order.²⁹ In addition, India also reiterated its support for freedom of navigation, over-flight, and unimpeded commerce under the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).³⁰ India has engaged with forums in the Indo-Pacific region like the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS), and ADMM Plus to create a consensus around the need to follow the rules-based order and ensure that the interests of states in the region are not neglected toward the benefit of one country.

3.2 South Korea

South Korea is the fourth-largest economy and has one of the largest defense expenditures in the Indo-Pacific region. As an export-oriented economy, South Korea has direct interests in open, inclusive, free, and secure sea lanes of communication. As the Quad agrees on the centrality of ASEAN in its Indo-Pacific vision, South Korea also recognizes and supports the centrality of ASEAN and ASEAN-led regional architecture.³¹ The U.S. vision of the Indo-Pacific recognizes the importance of working with partners and allies like India and South Korea to ensure stability and prosperity of the region. Quad and AUKUS are two forms of architecture currently addressing the region's strategic security threat. However, the U.S. also engages outside the framework of existential structures with allies and partners in the region. South Korea is an important ally and critical in strengthening the stability of the Indo-Pacific region. As an ally of the U.S., South Korea has increasingly aligned its strategic vision with the U.S. and Japan. The three countries share a vision of a free, inclusive, and open Indo-Pacific that respects a rules-based international order.³² Even the U.S.'s Indo-Pacific Strategy recognizes working with treaty allies like South Korea as critical to attaining the objectives mentioned in the strategy.³³ South Korea's Indo-Pacific strategy states to “promote our [South Korea's] vision of freedom, peace, and prosperity ... implement our Indo-Pacific Strategy based on three principles of cooperation—inclusiveness, trust, and reciprocity.”³⁴ The strategy clearly outlines the expanse of the Indo-Pacific region from the west coast of the U.S. to the east coast of Africa. The opposition to instability

in the Indo-Pacific region finds its place in the strategy quite precisely. South Korea's Indo-Pacific strategy highlights:

We oppose unilateral change of status quo by force and pursue a harmonious regional order where nations' rights are respected, and our shared interests are explored. Solidarity and cooperation amongst nations that promote freedom, human rights, and other common values will foster greater creativity and innovation, and lead to a brighter future for the Indo-Pacific.³⁵

It is important to remember that South Korea is a late entrant to the club of states that have their Indo-Pacific document (strategy/vision/outlook), and the document's release gives a sense of the motivation behind the formulation of the current strategy. This Indo-Pacific strategy became possible only after the new conservative administration came to power in South Korea. During the earlier Moon Jae-in administration, Seoul adopted a foreign policy of strategic ambiguity which took no principled position on issues in the Indo-Pacific region, particularly the U.S.–China rivalry, until strategically clear foreign policy was adopted.³⁶ The changed foreign policy stance was taken to support Yoon's GPS vision, which aims to expand beyond the Korean peninsula issue and to align South Korea's foreign policy initiatives more closely with the U.S. in the Indo-Pacific region. Hence, the Indo-Pacific strategy made more sense as it gave strategic direction and pointed out the challenges, principles, and tools to address regional issues. A new Indo-Pacific strategy acknowledging India's prominent role in South Asia and the Indo-Pacific region gives more clarity and opportunities for both countries to explore and cooperate, which was not previously the case.

South Korea has also expanded its reach beyond its adjacent maritime landscape by reaching toward the South China Sea and Indian Ocean region through multilateral institutions and bilateral mechanisms. In the South China Sea, South Korea has engaged with ADMM Plus for three reasons: emerging security community, deepening ROK–ASEAN Relations, and finding a venue for bilateral and minilateral dialogue.³⁷ Participation in forums like ADMM Plus also adds to South Korea's role as a norm influencer in shaping the security perspective on the Korean peninsula. Closer relations with Southeast Asian countries also help in addressing challenges and leveraging opportunities. The challenge of China's rise and the unpredictability of the U.S. forces South Korea to look toward new avenues of cooperation in the region, and the opportunity in this engagement is to strengthen defense cooperation and industry through exchanges, transfers of technology, and localized production in alignment with the New Southern Policy PLUS.³⁸ The focus is also shifted toward the Indian Ocean Region for Seoul as it joined the IORA as a Dialogue partner, signaling the growing importance of the IOR and the need to engage by pursuing diplomatic diversification through regional strategic communications.³⁹ The emphasis is to expand the ambit of cooperation in areas of maritime security, cultural exchanges, tourism, and development. The broadening interest in engaging with several institutional structures addressing security in respective regions of the Indo-Pacific indicates the magnifying perspective of South Korea for the Indo-Pacific region. The release of the Indo-Pacific strategy for the region gives the earlier disintegrated approach a clear strategic direction and a framework that helps link strategy, institutions, partnerships, and initiatives in a common thread.

IV. Evaluating India and South Korea’s Military Cooperation with States in the Indo-Pacific Region

4.1 India

**Table 3: Indian Defense Companies in SIPRI Top 100 Arms
Producing and Military Service Companies in the World**

Company	Arms Sales (2019)	Arms Sales (2020)	Total Sales (2020)	Arms Sales as a % of Total Sales (2020)
Hindustan Aeronautics	2,930	2,970	3,124	95
Indian Ordnance Factories	1,900	1,900	1,935	98
Bharat Electronics	1,570	1,630	1,918	85

Total Sales are in millions of USD. Source: created by the author from the “SIPRI Arms Industry Database 2021,” *SIPRI*, <https://www.sipri.org/databases/armsindustry>, accessed January 28, 2023.

India has supported Indo-Pacific countries by selling defense assets and offering services and soft loans. It has provided a Line of Credit (LOC) to developing countries for defense and defense-related projects. In 2016 during his visit to Vietnam, Indian PM Modi announced US\$500 million as the 19th LOC to Vietnam for defense projects and simultaneously upgraded India-Vietnam relations from a Strategic Partnership to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, giving a new direction to contribute to the stability, security, and prosperity of the region.⁴⁰ Earlier in 2014, the EXIM Bank of India provided US\$100 million in LOCs to Vietnam, related to the agreement on delivering twelve Off-shore Patrol Vessels (OPV) between Larsen and Toubro and Vietnam Border Guards.⁴¹

Similarly, in April 2019, the EXIM Bank of the Government of India (GoI) signed an agreement with the Armed Forces Division of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh for a LOC worth US\$500 million for defense-related financing.⁴² The GoI extended a US\$100 million LOC to Mauritius to procure a helicopter, an aircraft, and defense assets to enhance its maritime security.⁴³

India’s arms exports:

- Mauritius already operates defense platforms supplied by India: Dornier Do-228, ALH Dhruv, Passenger Variant Dornier (PVD), a 1,300-ton offshore patrol vessel (OPV) named *Barracuda*, and signed a contract with Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL) for the export of one Advanced Light Helicopter (ALH Mk-III).⁴⁴
- India gave two patrol boats, named PS *Topaz* and PS *Constant*, to Seychelles in 2004 and 2009 and gifted a 48.9m Fast Patrol Vessel built by GRSE to Seychelles.⁴⁵
- India’s BrahMos Aerospace Private Limited (BAPL) signed a deal with the Department of Defense of the Republic of Philippines to supply a shore-based anti-ship missile system.⁴⁶
- India supplied a 3,000-ton diesel-electric submarine INS *Sindhuvir* to Myanmar as a gift and sold them Advanced Light Torpedo (ALH) Shyena torpedoes made

by Bharat Electronics Ltd. (BEL), an Indian public sector enterprise, for US\$37.9 million in 2017.⁴⁷

4.2 Evaluating South Korea's Military Cooperation with States in the Indo-Pacific Region

Table 4: South Korean Defense Companies in SIPRI Top 100 Arms Producing and Military Service Companies in the World

Company	Arms Sales (2019)	Arms Sales (2020)	Total Sales (2020)	Arms Sales as a % of Total Sales (2020)
Hanwha Aerospace	2,260	2,250	4,510	50
Korea Aerospace Industries	1,766	1,720	2,384	72
LIG Nex1	1,250	1,360	1,360	100
Hanwha Defense	1,260	1,220	1,218	100
Hanwha Corp.	990	1,170	3,398	34

Total Sales are in millions of USD. Source: created by the author from the "SIPRI Arms Industry Database 2021," SIPRI, <https://www.sipri.org/databases/armsindustry>, accessed January 28, 2023.

South Korea's military spending reached a total of \$50.2 billion in 2021 and is ranked ninth on the list of arms exporters in the 2016–2020 period.⁴⁸ South Korea developed its first KF-21 prototype, an indigenous-made next-generation Korean fighter jet with cutting-edge technology, and it intends to deploy 40 KF-21 by 2028 and 120 by 2032.⁴⁹

South Korea's arms exports:

- South Korean defense company Hanwha Defense signed a deal to provide thirty units of K9 self-propelled howitzers to Australia.⁵⁰
- South Korean Defense manufacturer Hanwha Defense, in collaboration with Indian Private Defense Manufacturer Larsen and Toubro, produced the K9-Vajra in India, and an additional order of 200 units of K9-Vajra was placed by India in 2022.⁵¹
- Korea Aerospace Industries Co. (KAI) received a US\$240 million deal with Indonesia for a trainer jet deal to supply six T-50 advanced trainer jets to the Indonesian air force.⁵²
- South Korea signed a US\$420 million deal to export twelve FA-50 fighter jets by KAI to the Philippines in 2014 and delivered a 2,600-ton Guided Missile Frigate to the Philippines Navy in 2020.⁵³
- South Korea signed a US\$260 million agreement in 2017 with Thailand to provide eight T-50 trainer jets and two more T-50TH Advanced trainers jets to Thailand's air force, a US\$78 million deal in 2021.⁵⁴
- New Zealand's Royal New Zealand Navy (RNZN) received a 26,000-ton vessel, the largest built by South Korean Hyundai Heavy Industries, in 2020.⁵⁵
- United Arab Emirates signed a preliminary deal with South Korea for Cheongung II mid-range, surface-to-air missiles costing around US\$3.5 billion.⁵⁶

V. India and South Korea's Defense Relations

South Korea and India have “special strategic partnerships” based on “shared universal values of democracy, [and a] stable, secure, free, open, inclusive and rules-based region.”⁵⁷ These strong relations have exponentially grown through increased cooperation and engagement in different sectors. The traditional security awareness in the Indo-Pacific region has heightened since Chinese aggression became more overt. But long before, India and South Korea shared the perspective on the need for an open and inclusive economic regional architecture that recognizes both countries’ long-term and legitimate interests based on mutual benefit and shared opportunity in the region.⁵⁸ Despite South Korea not being a member of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue that consists of India, the U.S., Australia, and Japan, it shares the values that the group upholds. South Korea and the U.S. share a vision for a free and open Indo-Pacific with a view to create a prosperous, safe and dynamic region.⁵⁹ Before releasing its Indo-Pacific strategy, South Korea took note of India’s vision in the Indo-Pacific region, which focused on inclusiveness and cooperation.⁶⁰ The white paper presented in 2018 by South Korea emphasized the need to consolidate political and economic cooperation with India and contribute toward peace, stability, and mutual prosperity by institutionalizing regional cooperation. One of the main objectives was to contribute to regional and world stability and peace.⁶¹ India and South Korea have systematically expanded their closeness in the defense domain.

Both countries signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) on Defense Cooperation and Defense Research and Development in 2010 and a subsequent bilateral agreement on the Protection of Classified Military Information during the South Korean president’s visit to India in 2014.⁶² This highlighted the states’ strategic intentions, even when the relations were dominated only by trade and commerce. They agreed to strengthen their relations in 2015 by establishing a 2+2 Format of Vice-Ministerial level defense and foreign affairs dialogue.⁶³ Under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and President Park Geun-hye of the ROK, relations expanded with new areas of collaboration. The interest diversified into cyber security cooperation, transnational threats, encouraging more collaboration between the shipyards regarding defense requirements, deepening defense cooperation through staff-level talks of the two navies, and regular visits by the heads of armed forces.⁶⁴

Since 2014, high dignitaries from both countries have regularly exchanged visits. These included Indian External Affairs Minister (EAM) Sushma Swaraj’s visit in 2014, PM Modi in 2015, Defence Minister Manohar Parrikar in 2015, and Modi’s second visit in 2019.⁶⁵ During 2018 heads of states meeting, both leaders reiterated their mutual perspective on encouraging cooperation between defense industries and enhancing exchanges in military training and experience sharing, research and development, and innovative technologies.⁶⁶ India’s Chief of Army Staff, General M.M. Naravane, also visited South Korea and agreed on improving bilateral training exercises, educational exchanges, and defense industry cooperation.⁶⁷ During South Korean Defense Minister Suh Wook’s visit to India in 2021, both countries showed interest in expanding their relations in defense shipbuilding, as South Korea was interested in supplying self-propelled anti-aircraft defense systems and building minesweepers for the Indian military.⁶⁸ The Indian Navy has also increased its engagement with South Korea. Three South Korean Navy Ships visited Indian ports in

2017 and were reciprocated by ICG Ship *Shaurya*'s visit to South Korea the same year.⁶⁹ In 2021, the Indian Navy's INS *Kiltan* joined with South Korean naval vessel ROKS *Gyeongnam*, a Daegu-class frigate, in the East China Sea.⁷⁰ The Milan 2022 exercise included the participation of South Korean Navy Frigate ROKS *Gwangju* (FFG-817).⁷¹

South Korean and Indian diplomats have maintained momentum in the absence of regular high-level visits due to the Covid pandemic to strengthen the defense cooperation between both countries. South Korea's ambassador to India has interacted with various stakeholders to bring relations closer between the two countries through his visits to Indian defense companies like Larsen and Toubro (currently manufacturing K-9 Vajra howitzers for India in collaboration with Hanwha Defense) and Mazagon Dock Shipbuilders Limited (MDL), and at the official level with Ajay Kumar, Ministry of External Affairs Secretary (East), where they "exchanged views on high-level talks and aspects of bilateral defense cooperation."⁷² Similarly, during a recent visit to South Korea, Ministry of External Affairs Secretary (East) Ambassador Saurabh Kumar discussed ways to strengthen strategic cooperation through regular high-level visits and meetings at the level of 2+2 vice defense and foreign ministers.⁷³ At the same time, South Korea's Vice Minister Cho Hyun-dong also reiterated the intention to strengthen "bilateral cooperation in various areas, including defense and the defense industry," aligning with their Indo-Pacific strategy.⁷⁴

India's Act East policy focuses on greater engagement with Southeast and East Asian countries, converging with South Korea's New Southern Policy (NSP), which emphasizes better relations with Southeast and South Asian states. India and South Korea's defense relations have come a long way from where they started. Former South Korean Defense Minister Suk Woo showed interest in participating in the Indian government flagship project Atmanirbhar Bharat (Self Reliant) with India in the defense corridor that was supposed to come up in Uttar Pradesh and Tamil Nadu.⁷⁵

India and South Korea are Indo-Pacific regional states in initial and advanced stages of setting up their military-industrial complex, but both states still depend on other states for their defense supplies. Between 2016 and 2020, India and South Korea's share in global arms imports constituted 9.5% and 4.3%, respectively.⁷⁶ They are also expanding the scope of the relations by identifying emerging areas of convergences, like critical and high-technology, supply chain resilience, cyber security and information technology, extremism, radicalization, and maritime security and the threats posed to it by terrorism during the National Security Adviser meeting. India and South Korea's move to expand their relations beyond the trade and commerce into new sectors is a positive development. However, the lack of progress in building on the existing MoUs showed the absence of a strategic thread. One of the major reasons relations have not proliferated comprehensively is the missing "strategic element" that binds the economic-security-technological nexus in today's emerging state-to-state relations. Another is the lack of a political vision in both states that can direct and nudge the pace of relations. If these aspects can be addressed, relations between the two countries can progress at a much faster pace.

South Korea can benefit from the liberalization and business-friendly environment in the Indian Defense sector. Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) through automatic route in the defense sector increased from 49% to 74% as a result of defense reforms and to boost the self-reliance policy of the government of India. In modernizing the Indian Navy fleet, South Korea can be a vital partner. Major defense manufacturers like Lockheed Martin

and Hyundai Heavy Industries (HHI) can help India upgrade its fleet with the latest technology, like the Aegis Ballistic Missile Defence (BMD) system. The Aegis represents India's logical choice as it builds new ships and aircraft carriers that are offensively viable and defensively secure.⁷⁷ The Indian prime minister, during his visit to South Korea, visited HHI and sought a partnership between Indian and South Korean shipyards to ensure benefit from its expertise and experience.⁷⁸ HHI subsequently signed an agreement with Larsen and Toubro (L&T) to build a Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) carrier.⁷⁹ Similarly, in his visit to South Korea, India's Secretary of Defense Production Raj Kumar expressed his intention to create a win-win partnership between the two countries in the defense sector and also proposed to export K9-howitzers to third-party countries in cooperation with South Korea.⁸⁰ Due to its advanced military exports, South Korea can support and collaborate to strengthen and modernize Indian defense. Shipbuilding is one sector where both countries can work together, and with the vision of stable and prosperous Indo-Pacific the opportunities to explore remain hopeful. We may see India and South Korea grow closer due to strategic space constraints with a new cold war settling in. The existing two narratives in the region provided by China and the U.S., respectively, are contradictory to each other's vision and make the regional order a bipolar contest which both India and South Korea don't want, as they would like to explore a third way with the role of ASEAN countries at the center.⁸¹

VI. Conclusion

In the Indo-Pacific region, the emerging asymmetrical geopolitical power dynamic pushes existing relations to the test. The geopolitical alignments in the Indo-Pacific region are polarizing the international system into a bipolar order, with the influence of other global developments. Due to the shifting power dynamics, the Indo-Pacific regional security architecture remains in the middle of this geopolitical eye. In addition, the convergence of geoeconomics and geopolitics, in the form of geostrategy, is adding more pressure on states in the region. This has led to many challenges in pursuing an independent foreign policy. Recently, the Indo-Pacific region has attracted particular attention amid U.S.–China strategic rivalry. India and South Korea, which share strategic realities and a greater sense of insecurity than other countries, will play a vital role in shaping and influencing the geopolitical and strategic direction the region may take. Defense cooperation between the two countries will increase, focusing on high-level meetings (military and political level), military exercises, and exchanges between defense and epistemic communities. Sales and procurement of defense equipment and arms will also increase as the militaries of both countries build up. Defense research, innovation, and lines of credit are some innovative ways that both countries have helped states look for better economic incentives and technology transfers. The opportunity also lies in strengthening the defense cooperation with other countries in the region as they also look to enhance their military power. Strategic stability and economic considerations are two factors driving both countries to expand their roles. In addition, the Indo-Pacific strategies enunciated by India and South Korea lay down a strategic roadmap to ensure that the region remains safe, secure, and stable. ASEAN remains at the fulcrum of the Indo-Pacific outlook of both countries. Another

convergence in India's Act East policy and South Korea's New Southern Policy also acts as a bridge to strengthen cooperation with ASEAN at its center. Building strategic ties through defense cooperation is an additional factor India and South Korea would explore further together and with other countries. Defense companies based in India and South Korea that produce arms and equipment will be critical in further developing strategic ties in the defense sector. This cooperation between the two countries also allows for collaboration on issues that would deepen defense ties by focusing on topics such as extremism, radicalization, supply chain resilience, as well as cyber and critical technologies.

The implications of the new geostrategic alignments are even shaping the cooperation and engagement in the arms trade. Irrespective of emerging as a reliable partner, the market covered by India and South Korea remains very low. Some challenges remain for India and South Korea. Deliveries of weapons systems like missiles, such as BrahMos, to Russia can be a matter of concern for several countries in the Indo-Pacific region. Similarly, South Korea's dependence on U.S. technologies and its alliance may restrict the space to strengthen cooperation with any country which shares adversarial relations with the U.S. As the cooperation and collaboration between India and South Korea grow exponentially, with their stature also rising as middle-power norm influencers, but most importantly as emerging defense suppliers, the vitality of these relations will be one of the bedrocks in ensuring the stability of the Indo-Pacific region.

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