

MP-IDSA *Commentary*

The Deepening India-South Korea Cooperation in Arms Production and Shipbuilding

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S*ummary*

India-South Korea relations are moving towards deeper engagement in strategic industries, such as arms production and shipbuilding.

Introduction

India–South Korea relations have evolved since the end of the Cold War period as both countries have deepened their bilateral economic and strategic ties.¹ Economic liberalisation and the initiation of the ‘Look East’ policy in India played a crucial role in building a partnership between New Delhi and Seoul. More recently, South Korea has emerged as an important partner in India’s ‘Make in India’ strategy, and both countries have been strengthening their bilateral cooperation in arms production.² The shipbuilding sector is also projected to see deeper cooperation between these two Asian nations in the coming years.

Notably, India has been heavily dependent on foreign countries in both arms production and shipbuilding. On the other hand, South Korea has emerged as a leading producer of both defence equipment and ships. In the context of the Russia–Ukraine war, which began in 2022, Seoul has emerged as one of the major exporters of arms to North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) member states.³ New Delhi has been looking to build partnerships with countries that could help India develop its arms production and shipbuilding industries. In this regard, India–South Korea relations have gained significance, reflecting the growing trust between them. From the Indian perspective, Seoul is a “crucial partner” in New Delhi’s campaign to become a developed country by 2047.⁴

The Evolution of India–South Korea Economic and Strategic Partnership

Although there had been long historical and cultural relations between the Indian subcontinent and the Korean Peninsula, the economic and strategic relations between India and South Korea progressed after the end of the Cold War. Since then, South Korean Chaebols, or family-controlled large business groups such as Hyundai, Samsung and LG, have gained prominence in the world's most populous country. South Korean products have gained the trust of Indian consumers for their high quality and reasonable pricing. Similarly, South Korean popular

¹ David Brewster, [“India’s Developing Relationship with South Korea: A Useful Friend in East Asia”](#), *Asian Survey*, Vol. 50, No. 2, March/April 2010, pp. 402–425.

² Ranjit Kumar Dhawan, [“The Political Economy of South Korea’s Arms Trade with India: Challenges and Prospects”](#), *Journal of Defence Studies*, Vol. 19, No. 4, October–December 2025, pp. 74–90.

³ Wooyeal Paik, [“South Korea’s Emergence as a Defense Industrial Powerhouse”](#), *Asie.Visions*, Ifri, No. 139, February 2024.

⁴ Paik Ji-Hwan, [“Ambassador Stresses Korea’s Role as ‘Crucial Partner’ for India’s Economic Transformation”](#), *Korea JoongAng Daily*, 8 May 2026.

culture, known as the ‘Korean Wave’ or Hallyu, has gained popularity among the Indian population, particularly in the northeastern states.

People-to-people contacts have increased between India and South Korea, and bilateral trade has reached around US\$ 27 billion. The strategic engagement between New Delhi and Seoul has also increased as the bilateral relations were enhanced to that of ‘Special Strategic Partnership’ in 2015. In October 2025, India and South Korea held their first-ever bilateral naval exercise to enhance maritime engagement in the Indo-Pacific region.⁵ The South Korean Navy has also been participating in the ‘MILAN naval exercise’ in India along with multiple other nations.

The ‘Act East’ policy has been a major initiative of the Indian government under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi to build closer economic, cultural and strategic engagement with the countries of the Asia-Pacific region, including South Korea. The advent of the Lee Jae Myung administration in June 2025 and its ‘pragmatic diplomacy’ have increased India's importance in South Korea’s foreign affairs. Notably, President Lee has pledged to take the India–South Korea relationship to “an entirely new level”.⁶ During his summit with Prime Minister Modi on 20 April 2026 in New Delhi, several important issues were discussed to enhance cooperation between the two countries in trade, critical minerals, artificial intelligence (AI), shipbuilding, defence industry, steel production, nuclear power, digital technology, clean energy, cultural exchange, space research and QR code-based payment system.⁷

Indo-South Korean Cooperation in the Defence Industry and Shipbuilding

The launching of the ‘Make in India’ strategy by the Narendra Modi government in 2014 aimed to reduce India’s heavy dependence on the import of manufactured goods. Particularly, India has been one of the largest importers of defence equipment in the world. In this regard, the indigenisation of defence industries has been crucial for India’s ‘strategic autonomy’ in international affairs.⁸

⁵ [“Inaugural Edition of the India–Republic of Korea Navy Bilateral Exercise”](#), Press Information Bureau, Ministry of Defence, Government of India, 14 October 2025.

⁶ Yi Whan-woo, [“President Says Korea-India Relations Will Enter ‘Entirely New Level’ After Summit”](#), *The Korea Times*, 20 April 2026.

⁷ [“Joint Strategic Vision for India-ROK Special Strategic Partnership”](#), Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 20 April 2026.

⁸ Kuldeep Verma and Divya Dwivedi (eds), [The Quest for Strategic Autonomy: Indigenisation of Indian Defence Industry](#), Knowledge World and Routledge, London and New York, NY, 2025.

Similarly, India grapples with a shortage of shipping vessels and Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) carriers. The ‘Maritime Amrit Kaal 2047 Vision’ has been a strategy of the Modi government to acquire more ships, which are crucial for both India's external trade and maritime security.

The engagement between India and South Korea has diversified into new areas such as the defence industry and shipbuilding. The K9 Vajra howitzers have been the single major defence product that symbolises the successful partnership between India and South Korea in arms production. The April 2025 agreement between the Indian company Larsen and Toubro (L&T) and the South Korean company Hanwha Aerospace to construct 100 additional K9 Vajra howitzers in India exemplifies the potential for greater cooperation in arms production between New Delhi and Seoul.

During Defence Minister Rajnath Singh's visit to South Korea in May 2026, both countries pledged to increase bilateral collaboration in the innovation of defence technology through the India–Korea Defence Innovation Accelerator Ecosystem (KIND-X).⁹ Also, the deepening cooperation between India and South Korea in the defence industry could enhance India's military capabilities against China and Pakistan.¹⁰

Similarly, India's shipbuilding sector needs cooperation from South Korea, which has emerged as a leader in the industry. In this endeavour, Cochin Shipyard in India has entered into an agreement with the South Korean company HD Hyundai to manufacture commercial vessels and amphibious assault naval ships.¹¹ Also, during President Lee Jae Myung's state visit to India in April 2026, the shipbuilding industry received significant attention. Both India and South Korea have agreed to deepen cooperation in shipbuilding, which aligns with the Indian government's goal of enhancing India's maritime capabilities.¹²

However, India's engagement with South Korea in the defence industry and shipbuilding faces a few challenges. According to a recent report in South Korean media, excessive regulatory mechanisms, labour activism, poor infrastructure, and a lack of skilled manpower in India could be detrimental to South Korean

⁹ Amrita Nayak Dutta, [“India, South Korea Agree to Deepen Defence Ties during Rajnath Singh's Seoul Visit”](#), *The Indian Express*, 21 May 2026.

¹⁰ Seong Hyeon Choi, [“Why China Will See India's Latest Defence Deal With South Korea As ‘Inevitably Sensitive’”](#), *South China Morning Post*, 25 April 2026.

¹¹ Lee Su-Jeong, [“HD Hyundai Signs MOU on Naval Shipbuilding Program with India's Cochin Shipyard”](#), *Korea JoongAng Daily*, 11 November 2025.

¹² [“India-ROK Comprehensive Framework for Partnership in Shipbuilding, Shipping and Maritime Logistics”](#), Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 20 April 2026.

investments in India.¹³ Also, there is a need to make India–South Korea trade mutually beneficial and to reduce the significant trade deficit between the two countries.

Conclusion

The ongoing conflicts in Europe and West Asia have disrupted the global supply chain and energy security, and have posed challenges for the ‘middle power’ countries like India and South Korea. Therefore, New Delhi and Seoul must cooperate and build new partnerships in arms production and shipbuilding. There is an immense possibility to deepen ties between the two countries. Evidently, South Korean President Lee Jae Myung's recent visit to India has highlighted the potential to take the bilateral relationship to a ‘new level’.

¹³ Na Sang-Hyeon, [“India Ready to Replace China As World’s Workshop, But Hurdles Remain”](#), *Korea JoongAng Daily*, 24 April 2025.

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