



## AWAITING A PIVOTAL PARTNERSHIP? THE CASE OF INDIA AND SOUTH KOREA

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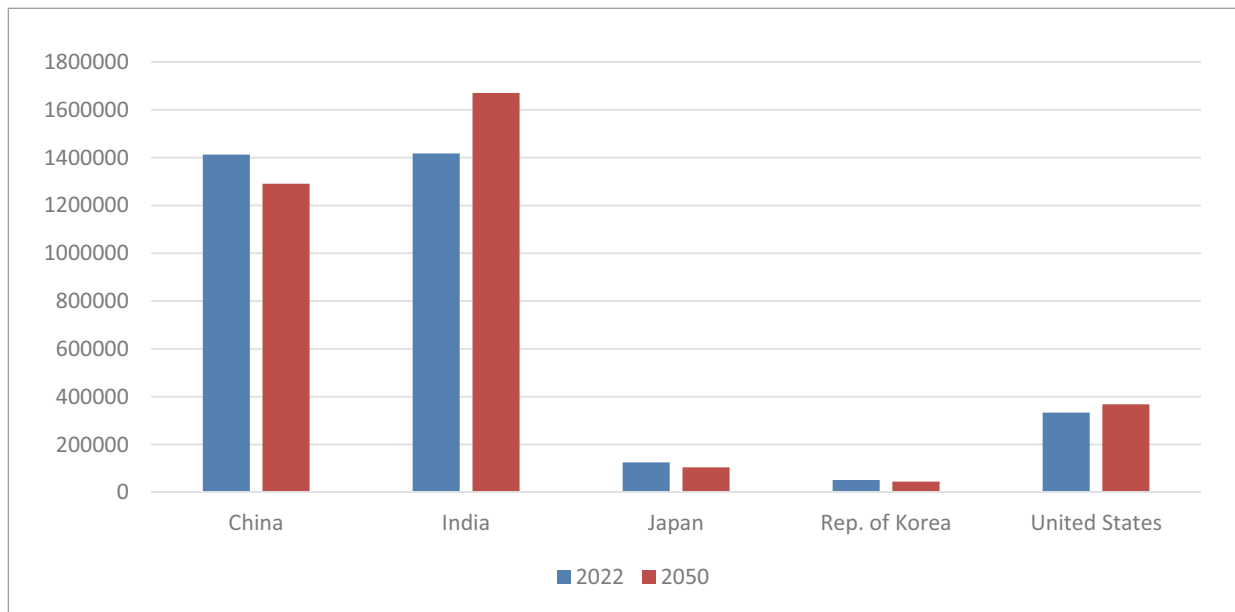
*The shift toward showcasing South Korea as a proactive stakeholder in the global arena—beyond its foreign policy limitations that have thus far centered on Northeast Asian security—has unlocked the potential for wider regional engagement and the growth of ‘like-minded’ pivotal states with global ambitions such as Australia, India, France, Germany, and Japan. In this great transition phase in the global order, which is facing the ill-effects of a widening ideological divide, India has emerged as one of the most prominent states with a burgeoning global profile and hence is a natural partner for the ROK. The new shift has fueled hopes of greater strategic autonomy in the ROK’s decision-making and greater strategic clarity as a pivotal state in the new geopolitical environment. Importantly, it has also renewed confidence in the two economic giants and ‘pivotal states’ coalescing their strengths to build a revitalized middle power coalition taking into account the larger aim of maintaining the stability, prosperity, and security of the Indo-Pacific.*

### Introduction

The launch of the Republic of Korea’s (ROK or South Korea) ‘Strategy for a Free, Peaceful and Prosperous Indo-Pacific’ in late 2022 by the Yoon Suk-yeol government with its emphasis on the ROK as a “global pivotal state” (GPS) has brought into focus the role of middle powers in determining the fate of the Indo-Pacific.<sup>1</sup> The shift toward showcasing the ROK as a proactive stakeholder in the global arena, beyond its foreign policy limitations that have thus far centered on Northeast Asian security, has unlocked the potential for wider regional engagement and the growth of ‘like-minded’ pivotal states with global ambitions such as Australia, India, France, Germany, and Japan. The momentum toward multipolarity and the rise

of unilateralism has further impacted great power politics and the role of these pivotal middle powers.

In this great transition phase in the global order, which is facing the ill-effects of a widening ideological divide, India has emerged as one of the most prominent states with a burgeoning global profile. A bulk of this can be attributed to its economic growth: It is the fastest-growing world economy and is likely to surpass Japan and Germany in the near future, benefitting from the demographic dividend in terms of the growing young population.<sup>2</sup> Figure 1 highlights the population gap, contrasting India and China with Japan and South Korea.



**Figure 1. Population of Major States, 2022 and 2050 (in thousands)**

Source: World Bank Database

However, it is India’s evident display of determined leadership in global strategic affairs—be it in the (so far) careful maneuvering of the Group of Twenty (G20) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) presidencies in 2023; or its delicate balancing of the West and Russia post the Ukraine invasion; or its continuing outreach to the Global South—that is most striking.<sup>3</sup>

How do the ROK and India fit into the geopolitical framework as today’s pivotal states? Will the ROK and India find increased convergence in their inclusive vision for the Indo-Pacific and beyond? Could an effective middle power coalition surface to combat the global challenges and balance the great power rivalry?

### Tracing the Contours of India and South Korea as Pivotal States

The concept of a pivot state dates back to the early nineteenth century when the British geographer Sir Halford John Mackinder postulated his “heart-land” or “pivot area” theory. He essentially contended that the control of the “pivot region” (namely “that [wholly continental] vast area of Euro-Asia”) was instrumental in deciding which power would govern the world, while naming the Russian empire that controlled the Eurasian region as the pivot state.<sup>4</sup> Notwithstanding the importance of revisiting, if not

contextualizing, Mackinder’s theory for today’s geopolitics, the definition of a pivot or pivotal state has undergone a transformational shift since the 1900s. Sweijs *et al.* in their 2014 study, defined a pivot state thus:

Pivot states possess military, economic or ideational strategic assets that are coveted by great powers. They are caught in the middle of overlapping spheres of influence of these great powers as measured by associations that consist of ties that bind (military and economic agreements and cultural affinities) and relationships that flow (arms and commodities trade and discourse). A change in a pivot state’s association has important repercussions for regional and global security.<sup>5</sup>

In this context, the ROK and India are potential pivotal states because they are crucial in shaping or defining the trajectory of Indo-Pacific security and stability. Even though they do not belong to the “seams” of international order, they are still caught within the “overlapping spheres of interest” of the U.S.-China major power rivalry.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, “new” or non-traditional security issues are no longer “peripheral”, as they might have been about three decades ago.<sup>7</sup>

Over the years, especially in the post COVID-19 pandemic

geopolitics, they not only have been fully integrated into the strategic frameworks globally but also have found mainstream resonance. Newly emerging trans-border multilateral issues such as demographic transition, climate change, terrorism, global health, economic security, food and energy shortage, and the technological revolution are very much within the ambit of the India-ROK new cooperation mechanism.

## Ascertaining South Korea's GPS Manifesto

South Korea's stable transition into a democratic economic powerhouse has meant that the country has long been projected as a formidable middle power looking to capitalize on successive governments' visions for a 'Global Korea'. The highlight of this political buzzword dates back to the Lee Myung-bak (2008-2013) era. Lee emphasized pursuing bilateral, trilateral, and multilateral engagements, as well as hosting the second Nuclear Security summit in 2012 and the G20 summit in 2010—the ROK becoming the first Asian and non-G8 (now G7 after Russia was suspended in 2014 over its annexation of Crimea) host of the summit of the world's 20 largest industrialized and emerged economies.<sup>8</sup> The invitation as an observer in the Group of Seven (G7) summits in 2020 and 2021 not only reflected the Indo-Pacific's importance as the world's center of gravity but also hastened the need for the ROK to undertake bigger challenges.

Again this year, current G7 host Japan had invited both ROK and India—among six other nations, namely Australia, Brazil, Comoros (African Union [AU] chair), Cook Islands (Pacific Islands Forum [PIF] chair), Indonesia (Association of Southeast Asian Nations [ASEAN] chair), and Vietnam—to the group's May summit in Hiroshima.<sup>9</sup> The inclusion of the ROK among invited countries that are chairing multilateral forums highlights not only the need and potential of expanding the G7 to include diversity but also the ROK's centrality in it.<sup>10</sup>

Under the circumstances, South Korea's expanding focus beyond its immediate neighborhood by the Yoon administration via the recent Indo-Pacific strategy is a key move. Importantly, the very release of the document was a powerful signal that South Korea was no longer a silent, neutral entity, but a powerful player in the geopolitical arena, willing to stand up for its democratic values. In

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other words, not only did Seoul's release of its Indo-Pacific policy unfetter Seoul from its (until now) persistent and singular focus on its foremost adversary, North Korea, but it also marked Seoul's formal foray into the international system as a GPS.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, the policy has fueled both hopes and expectation of greater strategic autonomy in the ROK's decision-making and greater strategic clarity as a pivotal player in the new geopolitical environment.<sup>12</sup>

As the strategy also recognizes, the ROK is the only country to rise from being one of the world's poorest countries to becoming an Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) donor country.<sup>13</sup> At the same time, it is also a major democracy and a leader in the fields of science and technology, innovation and digital transformation. In this context, in its quest to become a GPS, the policy emphasizes that South Korea is willing and able to assume greater roles and responsibilities. As a major economic power, greater economic diplomacy with small states and fellow middle powers can be an important opportunity as South Korea looks to carve its position in the emerging Indo-Pacific global economic architecture.

In digital economy particularly, Seoul can be an important power in the region, supporting cooperation in strategic areas like semiconductors, batteries, network industries,

next generation core technologies, and resilient global supply chains.<sup>14</sup> It can also contribute to efforts by like-minded powers to strengthening legislation and institutional support in these domains. For example, South Korea could support regional initiatives in improving connectivity and integration by participating in sub-regional projects in the Bay of Bengal or bolstering digital innovation in South and Southeast Asia.<sup>15</sup> Southeast Asia particularly would be prioritized higher than the other sub-regions considering its already strong trade and investment ties with the ASEAN members: In 2021, the ROK's foreign direct investment inflow to ASEAN was US\$6.15 billion—ROK's second largest investment destination.<sup>16</sup>

In 2023, the ROK and ASEAN have set ambitious goals for boosting “co-prosperity and solidarity,” as well as “reinvigorating international cooperation.”<sup>17</sup> These objectives include initiating programs that promote innovation in environment, society, and governance sectors, as well as e-mobility; exploring new growth engines to boost post-pandemic global economic transformation; strengthening cultural exchanges; and fostering mutual understanding via academic exchanges especially among the youth.<sup>18</sup> If such efforts propel inter-regional development initiatives with countries like India, it would be the icing on the cake.

Importantly, in the future, the ROK's GPS vision should also include strengthening “long-term security mechanisms” with ASEAN via the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in priority areas like maritime security, cybersecurity, and counter-terrorism.<sup>19</sup>

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Simultaneously, Seoul would be looking to revitalize its security arrangements with other Indo-Pacific partners, both bilaterally and via unilateral and multilateral forums. Naturally, the long-standing ROK-U.S. alliance, which has been the linchpin for allaying the ROK's Northeast Asian security concerns, forms an integral aspect of the GPS. The U.S.-ROK-Japan trilateral is already making strides for ensuring security in Northeast Asia, thanks to the U.S. push for mending ties between the historical antagonists, Japan and South Korea.<sup>20</sup>

Last but not least, the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue or Quad (comprising Australia, India, Japan, and the U.S.) would be a natural partner to explore strategic cooperation in non-traditional security areas, particularly climate change and global health.<sup>21</sup> Considering the ROK was part of the “Quad Plus” grouping during the COVID-19 pandemic, its transition into a regular contributor to Quad's wide-ranging developmental agenda via working groups or as a consulting partner is not an unreasonable expectation.

### **India-ROK: Toward a Resilient, Comprehensive Partnership**

In this expanded focus beyond Northeast Asia, with the aim to become a GPS, South Korea is increasingly prioritizing

diversification of its foreign relations with middle powers like India, Japan, and ASEAN states, as well as the European Union (EU), and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). In essence, these partnerships can help South Korea strengthen its voice in regional and global affairs, while also helping it better navigate the increasingly complex Sino-American great power competition.<sup>22</sup> Among these partners, India now matters more than ever to the South Korean leadership as a pivotal Indo-Pacific partner.

As South Korea seeks to move from becoming a mere observer of global politics to an active regional and global player, both middle power countries can find greater alignment in their shared interests and visions for the Indo-Pacific. Notably, both countries stand for a common vision of a free, open, secure, inclusive, and prosperous Indo-Pacific region, which goes beyond great power politics and competition. As India and South Korea celebrate 50 years of diplomatic ties, they are looking to build on their convergences and enhance cooperation on “global and multilateral issues” via high-level exchanges to consolidate their Special Strategic Partnership.<sup>23</sup>

Moreover, in the pursuit of effective multilateralism, it is important to note that both India and the ROK have had respective long-standing ties with global financial institutions (GFIs) such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Trade Organization (WTO), the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD), and the OECD. Of these aforementioned GFIs, India is a member of all but the OECD, yet the country has been cooperating with the grouping since 1995.

In this context, Table 1 provides a timeline of their membership in these GFIs.

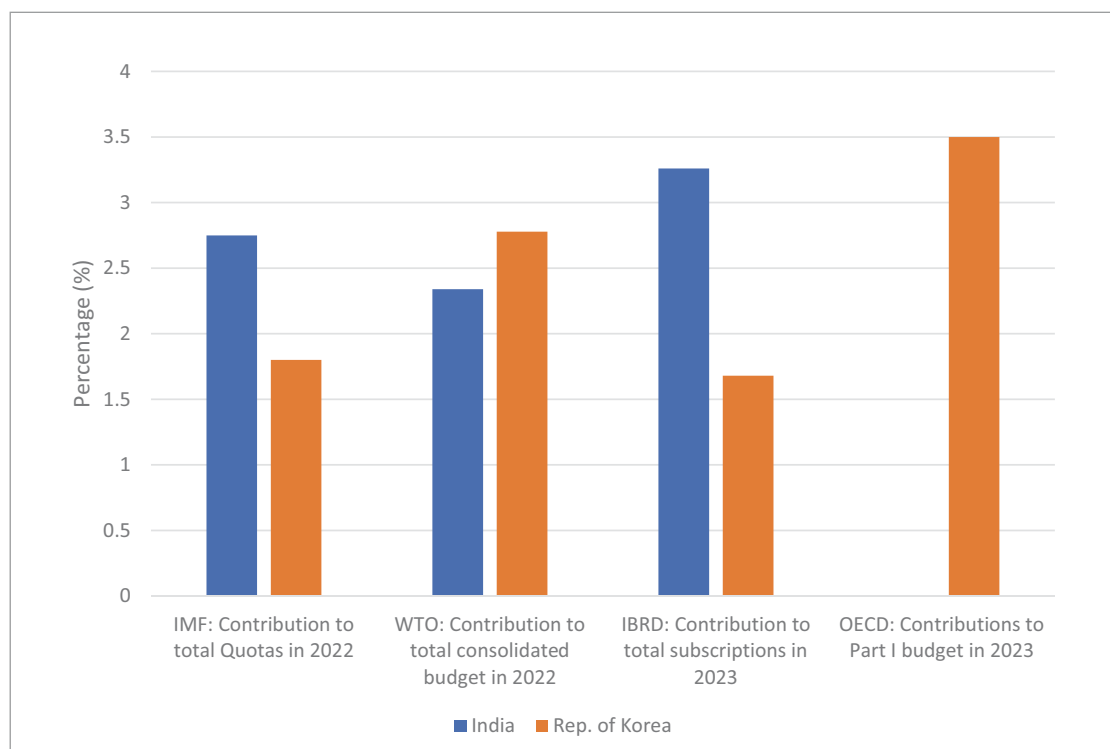
**Table 1. Membership timeline**

	IMF	WTO	IBRD*	OECD
<b>India</b>	1945 (founding member)	1995	1945	Not a member
<b>ROK</b>	1955	1995	1955	1996

*Note:* \*Conditional on IMF membership

Sources: IMF, WTO, World Bank, OECD

In addition, Figure 2 highlights the financial contributions by India and the ROK towards these GFIs.



**Figure 2. Percentage Contributions by ROK and India to four GFIs**

Source: IMF, WTO, World Bank, OECD

Furthermore, the ROK's pivotal state identity is strikingly similar to India's own multi-aligned (if not pointed-aligned) foreign policy stance. For instance, while South Korea is attempting to walk a line of fine balance between its foremost economic partner, China, and foremost security partner, the U.S., India is also increasingly forced into a position of managing its relations with both great powers amid escalating hostilities with China. Even as Seoul strengthens its alignments with Indo-Pacific partners and frameworks, it is not looking to entirely distance itself from China. In other words, both countries converge on their embrace of the Indo-Pacific construct, share a vision for the region, and are looking to avoid assuming an overtly hardline stance on China owing to their trade dependence on the economic giant.

This common position on China that is emerging between India and South Korea could be central to their future partnership. In many ways, the more frequent clashes and incursions over the Sino-Indian border have upped New Delhi's perception of the threat China poses to regional security. Therefore, India is prepared to boost its defense cooperation with the U.S. and allies to build the regional security architecture (e.g., the U.S.-India military exercises in Uttarakhand in late 2022 that led to the Chinese reacting in the form of the Tawang conflict in December), but remains conscious about not projecting its engagements as overtly "anti-China."<sup>24</sup>

Similarly, the ROK is also aligning more with the U.S. vision against the threat posed by China's military capabilities and Beijing's shielding of the North Korean regime, even

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as South Korea's position continues to maintain a separate trajectory from the U.S. vis-à-vis China.<sup>25</sup> Importantly, Delhi's need for balance will in turn also reinforce Seoul's position, which may feel greater pressure from Washington to pursue a harsher stance on Beijing.

### ***Why is India pivotal in South Korea's GPS ambitions?***

India is increasingly critical to regional and global economic and security cooperation. Given the importance of the Indo-Pacific for global trade, India's geographic positioning means it holds a crucial role in the protection of navigation and also in the control of strategic maritime choke points like the Strait of Malacca. This makes New Delhi a central player in maritime security in the Indo-Pacific, and particularly in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) where India has been expanding its dominance to respond to China's growing naval footprint.

Besides its growth as a maritime and economic power, greater geopolitical contestation has also prompted India to be increasingly active and assume new global responsibilities.<sup>26</sup> The year 2023 will be a particularly important one in presenting New Delhi as a pivotal state—primarily via the presidencies of the G20 and the SCO, which have raised its profile significantly and accorded power over the global agenda. However, it is essential for India not to allow geopolitical divides (e.g., the lack of consensus over the Ukraine war in the G20 meetings) to overshadow multilateral challenges such as climate action

and economic development. India's multi-alignment strategy enables it both to pursue partnerships, and be pursued, with a range of international actors and thus, has developed it into a critical "bridging" partner in the context of current divisions.<sup>27</sup>

For South Korea, these features in a close partner would be immensely beneficial, especially as it attempts to actualize its GPS ambitions. As a result, India is a prominent feature in Seoul's Indo-Pacific strategy, with their bilateral aiming to touch new highs of "future-oriented" cooperation in the areas of science, cutting-edge technologies, and infrastructure.<sup>28</sup> Notably, the cooperation builds on their shared tilt to consolidating an inclusive vision for the Indo-Pacific. It requires configuring a strong bilateral that can help boost multilateral and regional integration to pursue global ambitions.

In this vein, India's criticality in the multilateral strategic forum of the Quad makes it an even more appealing partner of choice. President Yoon views the Quad as an avenue to strengthen the ROK's military position and global profile, whilst also providing a way to pursue extended deterrence against North Korea.<sup>29</sup> Seoul's new Indo-Pacific Strategy accordingly emphasized the Quad's importance; and India's partnership could help the ROK in realizing greater cooperation at the working-group level and perhaps even inclusion into the grouping at some later stage.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, despite India's emphasis on projecting the Quad's broader ambit focusing on developmental partnership, of late, it

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has not shied away from participating in security-centered actions such as military exercises (e.g., Malabar) or bilateral defense pacts with the Quad members.<sup>31</sup> This bodes well for the India-ROK future security cooperation to counter the rise in challenges from North Korea and China to the free and open Indo-Pacific (FOIP), particularly in the maritime domain.

Overall, India's stronger appetite for countering China due to the repeated border clashes and strategic competition for influence in the Indian Ocean has enabled it to strengthen the U.S.-led security architecture in the Indo-Pacific. At the same time, India does have reservations against being seen as toeing the U.S. line completely and risks losing its strategic autonomy. This suits the ROK's Indo-Pacific vision that highlights cooperation and prosperity over tensions with China. Consequently, their coming together would promote maintenance of the status quo and the rules-based international order, using "balancing diplomacy" for the greater good of the region.<sup>32</sup>

### ***Why does South Korea's GPS vision matter to India?***

Even as India is listed as one of the foremost actors in South Korea's South Asian outreach—the third circle of its priority—the ROK's importance is comparatively less realized in Delhi's strategic policy. However, there seems to be growing awareness about the importance of raising the level of the India-ROK bilateral in a direction that befits the stature of the two countries. Regular political and diplomatic exchanges, regular high-level and working-level exchanges can help them develop their partnership and build it into a force for a stable, rules-based regional order that safeguards their interests and prospects. Such a potential and resilient partnership for the coming times requires continued and persistent focus across domains, from developmental initiatives to security matters.

Notably, South Korea should be harnessed as a gateway for India's outreach in Northeast Asia. The rise in the status of the economically and militarily dominant powers of China, Japan, and South Korea—with Russia and North Korea being economically weak nuclear powers—as well as a considerable U.S. presence, a treaty ally of the ROK and Japan, makes this region an unstable hub of Indo-Pacific geopolitics. In fact, Northeast Asia is currently most threatened by the developments in Taiwan and North Korea's nuclear provocations.<sup>33</sup>

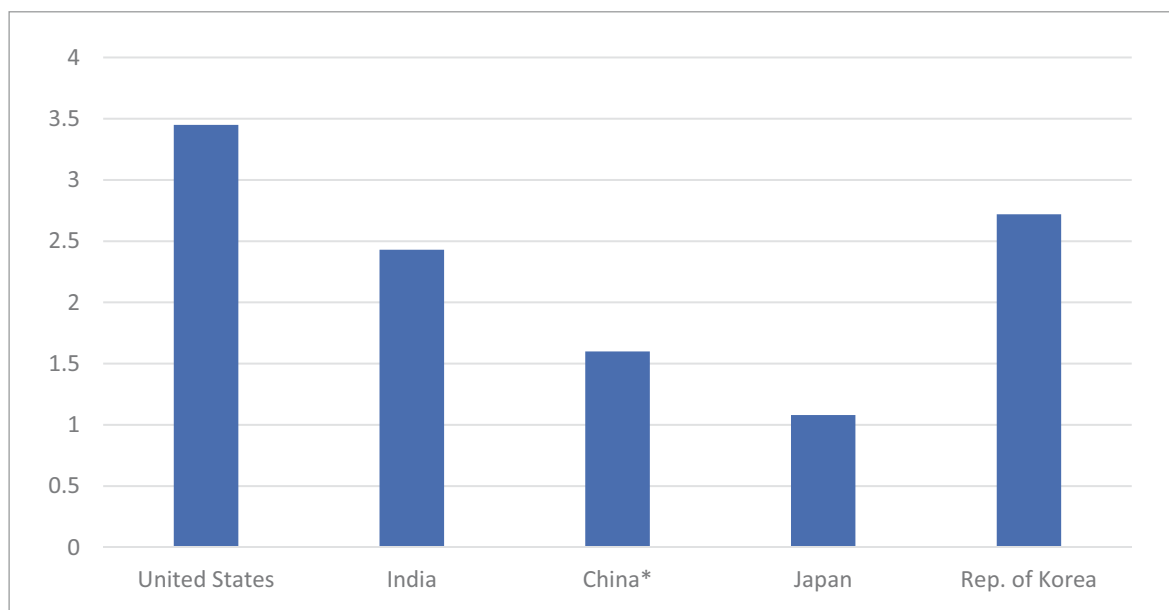
The resulting boost to the countries' defense budgets in the region due to this geopolitical uncertainty has created fundamental changes to the security environment, not to mention fueled arms race complications. Figure 3 provides an overview of the current estimated military spending of five central regional stakeholders to give a glimpse into the expanding regional security focus.

Against this scenario, India as a pivotal power needs to enhance its stakes in the sub-region's security and stability, for the lack of it will impact its own borders with China. Since South Korea is a central regional player, boosting engagement with Seoul would provide New Delhi with greater access to resources and partners.

### **Critical Areas of Renewed Convergence**

#### ***Defense partnership***

Over the last few years, Delhi and Seoul have considerably increased their defense and security cooperation. Given that their partnership largely revolves around addressing common challenges in their region, they have focused on efforts to ensure that reliability and capability factors are not compromised in the rush to coalesce forces. In 2018, a roadmap for cooperation in the production of both land



**Figure 3. Military expenditure as a percentage of GDP, 2022**

**Note:** \*SIPRI estimate

Source: SIPRI Military Expenditure Database



and navy systems was established, which was then expanded in 2021 when more agreements for joint research, products and exports of weapons were made.<sup>34</sup>

Over the last decade, South Korea has transformed into a defense manufacturing powerhouse—with arms exports up by 177 percent over the last five years, making it the eighth largest exporter in the world.<sup>35</sup> For a nation that has traditionally relied upon the U.S. for supplying equipment to its military, the stupendous growth of its indigenized domestic defense industry has been largely a result of its industrial policy goals.<sup>36</sup>

Moreover, Seoul produces high-quality weaponry that is more affordable for middle powers that face budgetary constraints; and so South Korea is a major supplier of weapons and military equipment to India, the largest arms importer due to continuous tensions with both China and Pakistan.<sup>37</sup> For example, India has purchased K9 “thunder” self-propelled howitzers.

Moreover, India lost out to South Korea on a US\$920 million deal for exporting light combat aircraft (LAC) to Malaysia: India’s indigenous fighter jet Tejas manufactured by Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL) lost the contract to Korea Aerospace Industries’ (KAI, South Korea’s sole aircraft manufacturer) FA-50 Golden Eagle due to KAI’s established brand name and proven capabilities.<sup>38</sup> In this context, India’s plan to jointly develop and export military hardware with South Korea is a future-oriented outlook that will encourage India’s domestic capabilities.<sup>39</sup>

Since the invasion of Ukraine, South Korea’s defense industry has boomed as European and Asian insecurity has soared. Notably, in July 2022, Seoul signed the largest military export deal in its history with Poland (amounting to US\$15 billion), which has generated revenues that the government hopes to pump back into the development of more advanced weaponry.<sup>40</sup> As India looks to diversify its weapons dependency on Russia, upping imports from the ROK could be a worthy alternative—and the move would receive support from the U.S. and allies that are eager to reduce New Delhi’s closeness to Moscow.

At the same time, even as South Korea participates in the economic sanctions against Russia and continues to provide humanitarian aid to Ukraine, it has refrained from sending lethal aid to Ukraine despite the U.S. looking for

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“potential sales of ammunition.”<sup>41</sup> It is contended that Seoul does not want to further alienate Moscow, which has hinted resuming military support for North Korea in case the ROK aids Ukraine militarily; Seoul even hopes to get Russian support in imposing new sanctions on Pyongyang.<sup>42</sup>

This highlights a convergence with India: New Delhi is likewise trying not to antagonize Russia for fear of the latter getting uncomfortably closer to China and even Pakistan, highlighting the danger of growing conflicts on two fronts. In addition, India would be perhaps also fearful of losing valuable Russian support in regional spheres such as in Central Asia, where China’s footprint is growing.

Another key area for a stronger India-ROK partnership is maritime security. Bilateral maritime cooperation has, in fact, been a “vibrant” part of bilateral relations.<sup>43</sup> Their naval and coast guard delegations have taken part in joint exercises routinely. For example, in 2022, Indian and South Korean naval ships undertook a Maritime Partnership Exercise in Busan. However, the potential to strengthen maritime cooperation in shipbuilding, logistics support, maritime domain awareness, or intelligence sharing is immense.

### ***Economic partnership***

Despite the India-ROK economic relations being the centerpiece of the bilateral for years, there are worries about the lack of impetus in revitalizing the scope that could be achieved. After more than a decade of having signed the

Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA, which came into effect in 2010), the total trade has shown growth (US\$23.7 billion in 2021, a 40 percent growth from last year). However, India's share in the ROK's global trade is still not substantial enough, at about 1.9 percent in 2021; while India's share in the ROK's global imports increased from 0.78 percent in 2001 to 1.02 percent in 2021.<sup>44</sup> So although CEPA has enabled the abolition of several tariffs on both sides and allowed a spur in trade and investment, the target of US\$50 billion, agreed to by Prime Minister Modi and President Moon in 2018, would be tough to achieve going by the growth trajectory to date. Nonetheless, the impetus provided by the post-December 2022 high-level talks is promising.

Concurrently, too, while India invested about US\$3 billion in the ROK, the latter pumped about US\$218 million into India in 2021, significantly down from US\$1,053 million in 2018—the year of the Modi-Moon summit. Undoubtedly, the importance of more high-level exchanges cannot be reiterated enough. In addition, the Indian government's "Atmanirbhar Bharat" (literally, "self-reliant India") policy should encourage joint production in automobiles, pharmaceuticals, and other sectors. India as a low-cost manufacturing base is an attractive option for Korean companies eager to export good-quality but price sensitive goods. As the Korean investment model hinges majorly on wholly owned subsidiaries, there is enough

scope to gradually shift toward the "technical tie-up" model favored by the Japanese.<sup>45</sup>

As a result, there is a long way to go in terms of optimization of economic ties. Understandably, the governments on both sides are keen to facilitate a smoother trajectory for the CEPA negotiations. They have held nine rounds of talks until 2022, with the next round slated for this year. For the Indian side, the trade deficit in South Korea's favor, as well as greater market access, is a serious impediment.<sup>46</sup> At the same time, in the highly brand-conscious Korean market, Indian-made goods are perceived to be of questionable quality.<sup>47</sup> Thus, there is a growing need to cover ground issues, like the lack of promotion of quality products, and creating conditions for a mutually favorable environment.

Beyond the growth in the bilateral, there are multilateral avenues where the two sides can strengthen economic cooperation. The launch of the U.S.-led Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF) in 2022 has given India and the ROK (both are members) a truly multilateral connect. In the aftermath of India opting out of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), where South Korea is a member, their participation in IPEF has to an extent filled a void in their regional connection. However, even in the IPEF, which covers four pillars, namely trade, supply chains, clean economy, and fair economy, India has decided to stay out of the first pillar (trade).<sup>48</sup>

Yet there is potential for concrete cooperation for India and the ROK especially in building resilient supply chains and creating sustainable digital infrastructure. South Korea as one of the leading manufacturers of high-technology components such as semiconductors, electronic vehicle batteries, and small modular nuclear reactors can substantially contribute to both clean energy and supply chain pillars.<sup>49</sup>

In the same vein, South Korea should also explore synergies with the Supply Chain Resilience Initiative (SCRI, comprising co-founders Australia, India, and Japan), as well as with the Quad working groups on both climate change and supply chains (on both clean energy and emerging technology). Considering 60 percent of the world's trade passes through the Indo-Pacific and the ROK is heavily dependent on the choke points for the majority of its energy trade, the stress on resilient supply chains is a

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need of the hour. This was evidenced in the recently held fifth Korea-India Foreign Policy and Security Dialogue, where the two sides emphasized making “global supply chains more resilient and robust.”<sup>50</sup>

Furthermore, there are signs that South Korean firms may be looking to limit production in China by relocating to and expanding operations in India and ASEAN states like Vietnam.<sup>51</sup> In India, for example, the Korean electronics major Samsung has recently announced plans of investing in smart manufacturing capabilities.<sup>52</sup> Since 2018, Samsung, backed by the Indian government’s tax benefits, has been operating the world’s largest mobile manufacturing plant in India, in an effort to edge Chinese firms like Xiaomi.<sup>53</sup>

### ***Technological convergence***

The Fourth Industrial Revolution, characterized by advances in emerging and critical technological such as robotics and artificial intelligence (AI), has become an integral part of states’ geopolitical strategy. South Korea, which is the hub of economic and technological transformation, can contribute in a broad range of avenues, from cleaner energy to defense equipment. The ROK’s prowess in high technology designing, engineering, and manufacturing would make a great combination with India’s expertise in information technology software and the growing young population, which can be upskilled in new technologies to gain competitive advantage.

India’s Act East Policy and the ROK’s new India policy within the prism of an engaging Indo-Pacific strategy will certainly upgrade the “strong complementarities” between the two countries in the fields of science and technology, including innovative technologies for mutual benefit that were recognized in the New Southern Policy (Plus)-era joint statement.<sup>54</sup> Already in 2023, the Korea-India Joint Program of Cooperation in Science & Technology has called for proposals on joint research projects in several areas such as green mobility, robotics and manufacturing, quantum technologies, and renewable energy including green hydrogen.<sup>55</sup>

As part of the CEPA negotiations, the India-ROK Joint Future Strategy Group will identify other economy-specific areas of technological cooperation. The two sides are seeking to cooperate in terms of establishing standard norms and developing conformity assessment models for ultimately providing Indian technological expertise

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to Korean companies.<sup>56</sup> India should also facilitate ROK’s participation in the Quad’s critical and emerging technology working group to further greater regional access to global technology markets and improving technology supply chains.<sup>57</sup>

Importantly, for their quest to attain a substantial quota of carbon neutrality goals in the near future, India and the ROK can showcase their pivotal state status by accelerating the sustainable use of emerging technologies, especially in clean energy initiatives. India’s intent to hasten green energy transition and its growing demand for renewable electricity tie in well with the ROK’s long-term aims to become a leading exporter in the area of green research and technology.<sup>58</sup>

### **Implications for a Middle Power Coalition**

The new and revitalized India-ROK equation can be a great boon for coalescing middle powers in the Indo-Pacific, including like-minded partners such as Australia, France, Japan, Vietnam, and Indonesia, largely to counter-balance the destructive impact of the China-U.S. continuing rivalry.<sup>59</sup> However, as the economic and political influence of these powers has grown, they are asserting to expand their global governance roles in order to maintain their respective national interests. For example, goals like strategic autonomy have become new buzzwords for these so-called “bridge”

states: Between not only the contesting major powers but also the Global North and Global South countries.<sup>60</sup>

In recent years, this latter aspect of middle powers as crucial bridges between the developing and developed worlds has been gaining ground in the global rhetoric; but it appears to have gone beyond their pitch as “honest brokers.”<sup>61</sup> The developing world is now being courted by these mid-sized states for their own ambitions, too. This is evidenced by India loudly proclaiming the concerns of the Global South; and if the participation of 120 countries in the Global South Summit in early 2023 is anything to go by, this largely ignored part of the world is eager to support such leadership.<sup>62</sup>

Japan, too, has actively been reaching out to the developing world amid warnings against the dangers of an increasingly “divided and chaotic” world: The refusal at the G7 (which Japan hosts this year) of using the term Global South in favor of “like-minded” or “willing” partners indicates a new trend of seeing the latter as equal partners.<sup>63</sup> Such a constructive global vision has been gaining ground among the middle powers, and provides a sound basis for an enhanced coalition in the near future.

South Korea’s involvement in MIKTA (referring to a grouping of the middle powers Mexico, Indonesia, Korea [ROK], Turkey, and Australia) also aims at strengthening the existing liberal rules-based order, bridging divides, and pursuing development cooperation.<sup>64</sup> As an active OECD partner, the ROK has played a pivotal role in sustainable regional and global development. Having been an aid recipient in its not-too-distant past, its financial contributions and developmental expertise for the Global South countries are a big asset, and demonstrate the potential and growth of ROK’s global leadership.<sup>65</sup>

In this context, the ROK’s teaming up with India—applauded by the UN Secretary-General António Guterres as the “first country to launch a single country South-South cooperation support framework, via the UN-India Development Framework Partnership” and the self-proclaimed voice of the Global South—to orchestrate a wider conjoining of “like-minded” pivot states for regional stability and prosperity is a practical plan.<sup>66</sup>

For the ROK, besides gaining global resonance (as a GPS), there is the added incentive of widely internationalizing its

Korean Peninsula concerns, including the denuclearization of North Korea; it will certainly bring the issue higher on the agenda for partners. Nonetheless, critics have bemoaned MIKTA as a “failed” initiative and the middle powers as “a thing of the past.”<sup>67</sup>

It is true that MIKTA has not lived up to its potential, especially as a transregional, economically diverse grouping—the same is also true for another such grouping called BRICS, of which India is a founder member.<sup>68</sup> Certainly, middle powers, too, have faltered in multiple avenues from mediation to institution building: The widening ideological or regional fault lines and heightened tensions in flashpoints highlight this failing.<sup>69</sup> Nonetheless, such doubts notwithstanding, the world is undergoing a transitional stage and so are the middle powers; and the current churning, be it in the G20, the G7, or within the Indo-Pacific bilaterals or minilaterals, indicates a resurgence of these bridge builders.

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