

India should forge stronger military ties with South Korea

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Implicit in India's realization that its erstwhile stress on non-involvement in foreign policy will no longer pay the same dividends lies the justification for a relatively new strand of realpolitik in its engagement with other powers of the world. India's foreign policy, particularly through the last decade, has picked up a rather discreet but pragmatic trajectory in which the basis of its engagement with other countries is governed by two important concerns: trade and military/strategy. More often than not, of late India has pursued the military leg of the relationship more vigorously than the trade aspect, or at least with equal emphasis, with countries that lie to its east. Three countries that immediately come in picture in the above scheme are Vietnam, Japan and South Korea.

The recent trends in the relationship between India and South Korea signifies the nascent premise in India's foreign policy whereby the hesitancy for a strategic tie up with another country is given up. Frequent bilateral visits, more and more military deals, joint military exercises etc. have given a new hue to India-South Korea relations. Importantly, the year 2013 marks the 40th anniversary of the establishment of their diplomatic relations.

In the last week of June this year, India's National Security Advisor Shivshankar Menon went on an official visit to Seoul. Apart from calling on South Korean President Park Geun-hye in Seoul, Menon also met Defence Minister Kim Kwan-jin and held discussions with his counterpart Kim Jang-soo. Kim Jang-soo had already visited India as defence minister in 2007.

In the second week of July, Chairman of Chiefs of Staff and Indian Air Force chief, Air Chief Marshal (ACM) N.A.K. Browne met South Korean Defence Minister Kim Kwan-jin during a four-day official visit to Seoul where he was heading a tri-service delegation of senior Indian military officers. During this visit, the Indian Air Force chief emphasised on cooperation in areas of military operations, training establishments, and defence industries. Browne also met General Sung II Hwan, Air Force Chief of Staff, and the two sides discussed the ongoing defence cooperation on expanding bilateral defence ties. General Sung II Hwan is also expected to reciprocate by visiting Agra and Jodhpur air bases.

The 40th anniversary of the bilateral relationship between the two countries provided a hands-on opportunity to India to give a boost to the strategic relationship between them. During both these visits, the two countries highlighted important areas of convergences on a variety of bilateral, regional

and international issues. More importantly, Air Chief Marshal Browne also visited other places of importance for India's growing strategic relationship with South Korea. ACM Browne visited the Second Fleet Command located at Pyeongtaek, Air Force Academy, located at Cheongju, Chungbuk, as well as the 17th Fighter Wing based at Cheongju, Daegu.

India's military diplomacy with South Korea started in the 1990s and picked up during the visit of India's Defence Minister A.K. Antony to South Korea in 2010 when both the countries signed a few memoranda of understanding to foster military exchanges. One of the MoUs was an understanding between Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) of India and Defence Acquisition Programme Administration (DAPA) of RoK for cooperation in R&D. DRDO's major participation in the International Aerospace and Defence Exhibition ADEX-2013 at KINTEX, Seoul in South Korea was a rare event displaying India's unprecedented desire to be an arms and military exporter in that part of the world.

Since the year 2000 many bilateral visits and significant developments have taken place, taking India-South Korea relations to a new high. Particularly since 2010, military/strategic relationship between India and South Korea has been on an upward trajectory. South Korean Defence Minister Kim Kwan-jin visited India from Nov 28-Dec 1, 2012, following that of his predecessor Kim Jung-soo in May 2007. In the same year, India's decision to place a permanent defence attaché in its embassy in Seoul was intended to bolster defence relations between the two countries. In June 2012, India, a major importer of arms and military hardware, purchased eight warships from South Korea. The year 2013 has been the highlight year in the bilateral relationship between the two countries because of the nature and frequency of visit-exchanges and because it has shown that strengthening of strategic/military partnership between India and South Korea is not far-fetched.

As India looks forward to extend the sphere of its Look East Policy up to the Far East, cooperation with South Korea (also Japan) becomes very important for two very important purposes: maritime security and freedom of navigation. The unprecedented rise of China and its aggressive maritime behaviour in the Asia Pacific and more importantly in the Indian Ocean of late portends that there will be unprecedented changes in the nature of partnerships, alliances and cooperation in Asia. There is going to be a massive increase in India's fleet and military requirements in South and East Asia. Defence trade and military (especially naval) cooperation with South Korea will serve India good purpose in times to come.

The coming of age transition in India-South Korea relations, where military partnerships seek an equal footing with trade, locates itself under the above mentioned geopolitical change. As India finds itself being drawn towards the US-led alliance in Asia due to its own converging interests with other countries to its east, South Korea comes up as a prominent highlight among its strategic options. If India really intends to shape the balance of power in Asia it will have to forge strong military relationship with South Korea among other countries. The new

calculations on India's part will have to involve cooperation with South Korea involving all the three wings of the armed forces, which hitherto has been restricted to small joint naval exercises and small military deals.

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