

# REIGNITING THE FLAME OF INDIA-KOREA DEFENCE COOPERATION

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'Despite recent high-level engagements, a challenge that persists is the absence of a shared vision for a new comprehensive defence framework' | Photo Credit: ANI

In the intricate tapestry of global geopolitics, defence collaboration emerges as a foundational imperative, crucial for the preservation of international peace and stability. The recent diplomatic overture during the visit of General Manoj Pande, Chief of the Army Staff of India, in November 2023, to the Republic of Korea, signifies a critical juncture in the trajectory of India-Korea defence relations. While this visit fortified diplomatic ties, it also unveiled the challenges, necessitating meticulous consideration. This prompts an exploration of the challenges faced by India and Korea in enhancing their defence cooperation, along with an examination of opportunities for mutual growth.

Despite recent high-level engagements, a challenge that persists is the absence of a shared vision for a new comprehensive defence framework, one that can provide a robust structure under which both nations can operate and align their policies to construct a novel and sustainable emerging regional order. The imperative for India and Korea is to transcend the confines of bilateral cooperation, and embrace a paradigm shift that cultivates a more profound understanding of their roles in the swiftly evolving global scenario.

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A hurdle lies in the resistance on the Korean government side to reassess India's role in the region. It is incumbent upon Korea to comprehend that India is not merely the largest consumer of defence products. Rather, it stands as a regional power capable of substantial contributions to peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific. A departure from Cold War mentalities, where the Korean government perceived India as standing in the opposite Soviet bloc, is imperative for Korea to forge a deeper, more meaningful partnership with India. This paradigm shift in Korean government strategic thinking is indispensable for any meaningful engagement between the two nations.

Further, the prevailing overemphasis by the Indian government side on weapons acquisition and technology transfer from Korea, while undeniably pivotal, has tended to overshadow broader strategic considerations. Similarly, the unwavering focus of the Korean defence establishment

on profit-driven weapons sales to India, devoid of strategic considerations, may prove shortsighted in the face of fast-changing geopolitical dynamics. Powerful arms lobbies in India and Korea pose a potential roadblock, emphasising the necessity to prioritise long-term strategic goals over short-term gains.

The emerging coalition of North Korea, China, and Russia poses a new serious challenge to collaborative efforts between the two nations. Divergent stances may arise, necessitating a nuanced appraisal of each party's strategic imperatives.

The high-level interactions of Gen. Pande with the top Korean military leadership and his engagements with the leadership of top Korean defence institutions, such as the Defense Acquisition Program Administration (DAPA) and the Agency of Defence Development (ADD), are anticipated to further unite the defence communities of both countries.

Leveraging their technological capabilities, India and South Korea are aiming to collaborate in developing advanced defence systems and equipment. Given their shared understanding of the pivotal role technology will play in future conflicts, the scope for cooperation in this sector is limitless. Such synergy can lead to a mutually beneficial defence technology and industry partnership, propelling both countries to the forefront of innovation and self-reliance.

In an era where defence against space warfare, information warfare, and cybersecurity is paramount, both nations can further explore opportunities for cooperation. Given Korea's status as an advanced high-tech digital superpower, vast opportunities exist in the development of robust security measures in these areas to effectively counter emerging threats in the digital domain, ensuring the security of critical infrastructure and information.

Strengthening coordinated efforts to counter terrorism aligns seamlessly with the shared concerns of India and South Korea. There is potential for collaboration in maritime security, including joint patrolling and information sharing, given the significant maritime interests both countries have in the Indian Ocean.

India and South Korea can leverage their United Nations peacekeeping expertise for collaborative efforts. Sharing insights and resources in peacekeeping operations can enhance regional and global stability, underscoring their joint commitment to peace and security. Additionally, joint exercises and the exchange of best practices in Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) demonstrate the shared responsibility of both nations in addressing vulnerabilities to natural disasters.

Lastly, mutual growth is found in enhancing joint army exercises, fostering interoperability, and strengthening the capabilities of both armies for effective collaboration in diverse scenarios. Gen. Pande's visit to Seoul has spurred the extension of cooperation beyond naval focus to other branches of India's armed forces.

While the recent visit of Gen. Pande has reignited the flame of India-Korea defence cooperation, the path forward necessitates meticulous navigation through the challenges and the wholehearted embrace of opportunities. A strategic, balanced approach, coupled with adaptability to the evolving geopolitical landscape is key to unlocking a robust and enduring defence collaboration, in turn creating a partnership that fosters peace, stability, and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific region. United, both nations stand ready to navigate the complexities and uncertainties of the future, forging a path toward a stronger and more resilient partnership.

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