

Friends or Seoul-mates?

South Korean President Moon Jae-in's four-day state visit to India early last month came at a time when Mr. Moon's administration is seeking to upgrade India-South Korea relations.

It was evident when Mr. Moon launched a foreign initiative called New Southern Policy last year that he had decided to step up Seoul's engagement with India and the ASEAN countries. That this new engagement had a strategic element was seen when he sent a special envoy to India immediately after assuming office. That step was a first in the annals of South Korea's diplomatic history, and it demonstrated its desire to shape a new paradigm of Seoul-New Delhi relations.

Additionally, this year, South Korea set up a state-run research centre on India and ASEAN under the Korea National Diplomacy Academy, which is tasked with establishing a theoretical foundation for the Moon administration's vision to diversify strategic partnerships across the Asian region.

What lies behind Seoul's reimagined diplomatic posture towards India? In recent times, South Korea has been heavily impacted by power politics between the U.S. and China. The clash between the two countries over the deployment of the U.S. Thaad missile defence system in the Korean Peninsula set off an economic retaliation by China against South Korea, whose economy is highly dependent on the Chinese market. Further, the ongoing U.S.-China trade war has heightened uncertainty surrounding South Korea's core economic interests. This has led to Seoul reassessing risks associated with economic turbulence stemming from Chinese policies, which is a threat to the national security of South Korea in some cases.

To escape the power politics in Northeast Asia, South Korean policymakers believe that Seoul should diversify its relations with other major powers in the region, including India which they see as a viable alternative partner. During his meeting with External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj, Mr. Moon pointed out that his government wished to elevate relations with India to the same level as with other major powers in the world — namely, the U.S., China, Japan and Russia.

There are multiple dimensions to the uptick in India-South Korea strategic ties, including working together on ensuring freedom of navigation, overflight and unimpeded lawful commerce in the Indo-Pacific region; South Korea backing India's bid for Nuclear Suppliers Group membership, especially when New Delhi has faced sustained opposition from China; and both nations working with third countries on a tripartite basis for regional development, exemplified by plans for capacity-building programmes in Afghanistan. Given the immense potential for cooperation to bring about real change that could benefit India, South Korea and the broader region, Mr. Moon's visit signals a deepening of bilateral ties driven by mutual strategic interest.

The writer is a Research Professor at Hankuk University of Foreign Studies in Seoul

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