

ILLUMINATING ASIA'S FUTURE

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - East Asia

On February 22, a day after South Korean President Moon Jae-in welcomed him as his first state guest of 2019, Prime Minister Narendra Modi was conferred the [Seoul Peace Prize](#) in the South Korean capital. Mr. Modi is a conservative, nationalist leader and Mr. Moon is a liberal-minded leader and a former human rights lawyer. Yet, similar to the *taegeuk* (yin-yang) at the centre of South Korea's national flag, the two leaders, like their respective nations' national identities and foreign relations, complement each other.

The striking historical characteristic of Korea is the homogeneity of its people and its continuous history, until recently, as a unified political entity. The same term, *Han minjok*, is used to denote both the Korean race and the Korean nation. Riven by subnational loyalties, India is anything but homogenous. Yet India too has exuded unity since time immemorial, which is renewed daily in the hearts and minds of its citizens. South Korea's national identity and nationalism were forged, respectively, by the collapse of Chinese universalism at the turn of the first millennium and, again, in the early 20th century. India was never part of the Chinese world order. Yet both nations were, in the evocative words of Rabindranath Tagore, "lamp bearers" in their modern histories, joined in the struggle against colonialism and determined to re-illuminate the East.

Korea's foreign relations with China were steadied once its Yalu River frontier was confirmed in the late 14th century. That frontier was as porous as India's Himalayan frontier is impassable. Yet both frontiers were breached by revolutionary communists in the aftermath of the founding of the People's Republic, with profound geopolitical consequences that linger to this day.

The long history of Korea's foreign relations with China also lends an important insight into its modern-day strategic conduct: essential to its preservation as an independent state on imperial China's periphery was an immutable policy of non-involvement in the power politics or international relations of its continental-sized neighbour.

Seoul today, alone among its Indo-Pacific peers, embraces relations with New Delhi solely based on India's inherent appeal and worth. India is not a hedge or a foil to be deployed against a rising China. This opens up, rather than limits, the space for bilateral cooperation, including on sensitive defence matters.

India and South Korea view each other today as special strategic partners. As they re-illuminate the eastern sky, they must also help forge a 21st century model of Asian international relations — one that is keyed to regional tradition and historical circumstance, imbued with an ethos of equality and consensus, and which resiles from doctrines that are zero-sum in character.

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The governance structure is in need of a drastic remake

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