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EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

Forging the India-South Korea Defence Innovation Bridge

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11 May 2026

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INTERVIEW ANGLE

"Is South Korea India's most underrated Indo-Pacific defence partner -- and what's holding back deeper co-production?"

EDITORIAL SUMMARY:

The Hindu argues that India and South Korea, despite a Special Strategic Partnership since 2015, have under-utilised their complementarity in defence technology. With President Lee Jae Myung's April 19-21, 2026 visit refreshing the strategic conversation, the editorial calls for moving the partnership from platform sales to joint R&D, co-production and Indo-Pacific supply-chain integration.

A PARTNERSHIP STILL BELOW ITS POTENTIAL

India's defence ties with South Korea began modestly with the 2010 framework agreement and were upgraded to a Special Strategic Partnership in May 2015. A decade later, the relationship's defence flagship – the K9 Vajra-T self-propelled howitzer, co-produced by Larsen & Toubro and Hanwha Aerospace under licence – demonstrates what is possible. India inducted 100 K9 Vajras between 2018 and 2021 and approved an additional 100 in December 2024 for high-altitude operations. Yet beyond the K9, the partnership has remained transactional: South Korea sells, India buys, technology transfer is limited.

President Lee Jae Myung's state visit between April 19 and April 21, 2026 – his first to India and a new chapter in the partnership since 2015 – has signalled an intent to push beyond this model.

WHERE THE COMPLEMENTARITIES LIE

South Korea is the world's tenth-largest defence exporter; its \$14 billion order book in 2024 was anchored by tanks, howitzers, naval platforms and trainer aircraft. Its industrial base offers India three under-tapped domains:

- **Land systems:** The K2 Black Panther main battle tank, in service with the Republic of Korea Army and Poland, is a credible reference design for India's Future Ready Combat Vehicle (FRCV) programme.
- **Naval co-production:** Hyundai Heavy Industries and Hanwha Ocean lead the global shipbuilding market. India's Maritime Capability Perspective Plan envisages 175 warships by 2035 – a target unreachable through domestic yards alone.
- **Aerospace:** Korea Aerospace Industries (KAI) and Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL) have explored cooperation on the KF-21 Boramae and India's AMCA programme, with subsystem and avionics sharing the realistic near-term ambition.

INDO-PACIFIC GEOMETRY

South Korea is not formally part of the Quad, but its Indo-Pacific Strategy of December 2022 places it squarely in the same strategic space. Tokyo, Seoul, Canberra and New Delhi share three concerns: secure sea lanes, resilient supply chains in semiconductors and [critical minerals](#), and a rules-based maritime order in the South China Sea and Indian Ocean. A "Quad-Plus" geometry that pulls South Korea into defence-industrial collaboration – without requiring formal Quad membership – is a low-cost, high-yield move.

WHAT SHOULD CHANGE

- ❶ **A joint Defence Innovation Bridge** modelled on India's iDEX and Korea's Defense Acquisition Programme Administration (DAPA) innovation cells, with co-funded start-up challenges in drones, autonomy and counter-UAS.
- ❷ **Co-development, not just co-production:** shift K9 successor programmes, naval propulsion and 155 mm artillery systems towards joint design ownership with shared intellectual-property rights.
- ❸ **Supply-chain hedging:** Korean component manufacturers should be invited to anchor in Indian defence corridors (Tamil Nadu, Uttar Pradesh) under the PM-led Make-in-India framework.
- ❹ **Critical minerals and semiconductors:** link the defence partnership to the broader resilient-supply-chain agenda, where Korea is a global node and India a rising one.

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Key arguments:

- India-Korea Special Strategic Partnership (2015) remains under-leveraged on defence-industrial cooperation.
- K9 Vajra-T model is a successful template; the next stage must be co-development with shared IP, not licence production.
- South Korea fits an Indo-Pacific Quad-Plus architecture without requiring formal Quad expansion.

Counterarguments:

- Korea's defence exports are tightly linked to United States end-use monitoring; this complicates third-country technology transfer to India.
- India's strategic autonomy doctrine resists alliance-style supply-chain integration with US treaty allies.

Keywords: Special Strategic Partnership 2015, K9 Vajra-T, Hanwha Aerospace, K2 Black Panther, KF-21 Boramae, KAI-HAL, DAPA, iDEX, Indo-Pacific Strategy 2022, Quad-Plus, FRCV, AMCA.

The Hindu's view is that India-Korea defence cooperation is at an inflection point. The K9 model proved the partnership can work. The next decade demands joint design, shared IP and integrated supply chains – the language of allies, even where formal alliance is neither sought nor offered.

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