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Rajnath Singh in Seoul: India-South Korea Sign Defence MoU, Deepen Strategic Partnership

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WHY IN NEWS

Defence Minister Rajnath Singh visited Seoul on May 19–20, 2026 — the second leg of a two-nation tour (Vietnam + South Korea, May 18–21) — and held bilateral talks with South Korean Defence Minister Ahn Gyu-back and Defence Acquisition Programme Administration (DAPA) Minister Lee Yong-cheol. India and the Republic of Korea (RoK) signed a landmark **Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on Defence Cyber Cooperation**, exchanged an agreement on cooperation between the **National Defence College of India (NDC)** and the **Korea National Defence University (KNDU)**, and agreed on enhanced **UN Peacekeeping Cooperation**. Singh also paid homage at the **National Cemetery of Korea** and chaired an **India–Korea Defence Industry Business Roundtable**.

INDIA–SOUTH KOREA BILATERAL RELATIONS: AN OVERVIEW

India and South Korea established diplomatic relations in **1973**. The bilateral relationship has been progressively elevated over five decades:

| MILESTONE | YEAR | SIGNIFICANCE |
|---|-------------|--|
| Diplomatic relations established | 1973 | Foundational bilateral engagement |
| Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) | 2010 | Preferential trade framework |
| Upgraded to Strategic Partnership | 2010 | First formal strategic upgrade |
| Elevated to Special Strategic Partnership | 2015 | Current bilateral framework |
| Joint Strategic Vision 2026–2030 | April 2026 | Five-year roadmap across all domains |
| India–Korea Business Roundtable (defence) | May 2026 | Rajnath Singh chairs defence industry summit |

Special Strategic Partnership (2015): The upgrade from “Strategic” to “Special Strategic” came during Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s visit to Seoul in May 2015. It formalised cooperation across five pillars — political and security, defence industry, economy and trade, science and technology, and people-to-people ties.

Joint Strategic Vision 2026–2030 (April 2026): South Korean President Lee Jae-myung visited New Delhi in April 2026 — the earliest visit to India by a Korean president after assuming office. The summit produced **25 key outcomes** and framed bilateral ambitions under the metaphor of “**chips to ships**” — covering semiconductors, shipbuilding, defence manufacturing, and clean energy.

Bilateral Trade: India–South Korea two-way trade reached approximately **\$27 billion** in FY 2024–25, with a joint target to scale it to **\$50 billion by 2030**. South Korea is India’s **13th largest source of foreign direct investment (FDI)**, with cumulative inflows of approximately **\$6.9 billion** (April 2000–September 2025).

Korean Companies in India: Samsung Electronics, Hyundai Motor Company, LG Electronics, POSCO, HD Hyundai, and Hyosung have major India operations. Samsung operates one of its largest global manufacturing plants in Noida, Uttar Pradesh. Hyundai listed on Indian stock exchanges in 2024 — one of the largest IPOs in Indian market history.

THE MAY 2026 MOU: WHAT WAS SIGNED

The agreements exchanged during Rajnath Singh’s Seoul visit on May 20, 2026 cover three specific areas:

1. MoU on Defence Cyber Cooperation

This is the centrepiece agreement. It focuses on:

- **Countering emerging cyber threats** to military networks and critical defence infrastructure
- **Sharing best practices** in digital defence architecture
- **Enhanced institutional mechanisms** for defence information sharing to improve situational awareness
- **Protecting critical military infrastructure** from state-sponsored and non-state cyber actors
- Joint capacity-building and potential tabletop exercises on cyber defence scenarios

Significance: As both India and South Korea operate sophisticated, increasingly networked armed forces — and face cyber threats from state actors in their respective neighbourhoods — this MoU institutionalises a channel for real-time information exchange and cooperative resilience-building.

2. Agreement on NDC–KNDU Institutional Cooperation

The **National Defence College of India (NDC)** and the **Korea National Defence University (KNDU)** formalised academic and institutional collaboration. This enables:

- Exchange of senior military officers for training programmes
- Joint research on strategic and security issues
- Curriculum collaboration on Indo-Pacific security, defence management, and civil-military relations

3. UN Peacekeeping Cooperation Agreement

India is among the **largest contributors of troops to UN peacekeeping missions** globally (4th as of 2025, behind Nepal, Rwanda, and Bangladesh). South Korea is also an active troop-contributing country. The agreement enables:

- Coordination of pre-deployment training standards
- Joint doctrine development for UN peacekeeping environments
- Potential collaboration in mission theatres

DEFENCE INDUSTRIAL COOPERATION: THE K9 VAJRA STORY

The deepest and most visible strand of India–South Korea defence engagement is **defence industrial co-production**, anchored in the K9 Vajra howitzer programme.

K9 Vajra-T: Key Facts

| PARAMETER | DETAILS |
|----------------------------------|---|
| Full designation | K9 Vajra-T (India-specific variant of K9 Thunder) |
| Category | Self-propelled, tracked artillery howitzer |
| Calibre | 155 mm / 52-calibre main gun |
| Range (standard rounds) | Up to 30 km |
| Range (extended-range munitions) | Up to 41.6 km; up to 50 km with precision-guided rounds |
| Burst rate | 3 rounds in 15 seconds |
| Sustained rate | 6–8 rounds per minute |
| Engine | MTU (Germany) — 1,000 hp |
| Maximum road speed | 67 km/h |
| Combat weight | ~47 tonnes |
| Production partner (India) | Larsen & Toubro (L&T), Hazira plant, Gujarat |
| Korean OEM | Hanwha Aerospace (formerly Hanwha Defense) |
| First batch ordered | 100 guns (signed 2017; delivered by 2021) |
| Second batch ordered | 100 guns (Hanwha–L&T contract, signed April 2025; ~\$253–254 million) |
| Total planned fleet | 200 guns |
| Domestic content (Batch 1) | Over 50% |
| Domestic content (Batch 2) | ~60% (target) |

Why “Vajra”? The Indian Army named the system “Vajra” (Sanskrit for thunderbolt / divine weapon of Indra) to align with the Indian Army’s Artillery Corps traditions and to reflect the thunderclap concept of the original K9 Thunder designation.

Operational use: K9 Vajra-T guns are deployed along India’s **western border** (Pakistan) and increasingly assessed for high-altitude deployment along the **northern border** (China/Line of Actual Control). The system’s wide-track suspension and automated loading make it suitable for rapid fire missions in desert and semi-arid terrain.

Beyond K9: What Is Planned

The K9 Vajra joint venture serves as a **template for future co-development**. During the April 2026 Modi–Lee summit, both sides agreed to **extend the K9 joint production model to air defence systems**.

Specific platforms under discussion include:

- **K30 Biho** — a twin 30 mm self-propelled anti-aircraft gun system (India has previously explored this)
- Future close-in air defence and C-RAM (Counter-Rocket, Artillery, and Mortar) platforms for use along the LAC

Korea–India Defence Accelerator (KIND-X): Announced at the April 2026 summit, KIND-X is modelled on the **India–US INDUS-X** (initiative by the US-India Defence Acceleration Ecosystem). KIND-X brings together defence companies, startups, research institutions, and universities from both countries to co-develop next-generation systems — drones, AI-enabled surveillance, directed-energy prototypes, and cyber-physical defence tools.

KEY KOREAN DEFENCE COMPANIES WITH INDIA LINKS

| COMPANY | SECTOR | RELEVANCE TO INDIA |
|---|--|---|
| Hanwha Aerospace | Artillery, armoured vehicles, missiles | K9 Vajra-T co-production with L&T; largest defence industrial partner |
| Korea Aerospace Industries (KAI) | Military aircraft, helicopters, trainer jets | T-50 Golden Eagle trainer considered by IAF; KC-100 utility aircraft |
| LIG Nex1 | Missiles, radar, C4ISR systems | Exploring Indian market; radar and electronic warfare products |
| Hyundai Rotem | Tanks, armoured personnel carriers | K2 Black Panther MBT assessed during India’s FMBT programme |
| Hanwha Ocean (formerly DSME) | Naval shipbuilding | Indian Navy collaboration on submarine and frigate programmes discussed |

INDO-PACIFIC CONTEXT: SOUTH KOREA’S STRATEGIC ALIGNMENT

South Korea’s Indo-Pacific Strategy (December 2022): South Korea released its “Strategy for a Free, Peaceful, and Prosperous Indo-Pacific Region” in December 2022 — the first such formal strategy published by Seoul. It emphasises:

- Rules-based international order
- Freedom of navigation and overflight
- Economic resilience through supply chain diversification
- Cybersecurity and digital cooperation

Alignment with India’s Indo-Pacific Vision: India’s own Indo-Pacific Ocean Initiative (IPOI, 2019) and South Korea’s December 2022 strategy overlap substantially on the themes of maritime security, infrastructure connectivity, and cyber resilience.

Quad (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue) and South Korea: South Korea is not a Quad member — the Quad comprises India, the United States, Japan, and Australia. However, Seoul is considered a **natural partner** to the Quad in areas of technology supply chains (semiconductors, critical minerals), cyber norms, and maritime domain awareness. India has actively encouraged South Korea to engage with Quad-Plus mechanisms.

Why South Korea Matters for India’s Neighbourhood:

- ❶ **Counter-China balance:** South Korea hosts **28,500 US troops** (United States Forces Korea — USFK) — a major US military presence that anchors the North-East Asian security architecture. Deepened India–Korea ties reinforce the broader democratic alignment in the Indo-Pacific.
- ❷ **Defence supply chain diversification:** As India weans off Russian platforms, South Korea offers **technologically comparable alternatives** with higher co-production and technology-transfer quotients than traditional Western suppliers.
- ❸ **Technology corridors:** Korea’s semiconductor (Samsung, SK Hynix), battery (LG Energy, Samsung SDI), and defence electronics ecosystems are of direct relevance to India’s Aatmanirbhar Bharat defence goals.

THE NORTH KOREA FACTOR: INDIA’S POSITION

India maintains a distinct and carefully calibrated position on the Korean Peninsula:

| DIMENSION | INDIA'S POSITION |
|----------------------------|--|
| Nuclear tests | Consistently opposes; calls for restraint and adherence to international non-proliferation norms |
| Denuclearisation | Supports complete, verifiable, and irreversible denuclearisation (CVID) of the Korean Peninsula through dialogue |
| UN Sanctions | Votes in favour of UN Security Council sanctions on North Korea's missile and nuclear programmes |
| Diplomatic ties | India maintains diplomatic relations with both Koreas; embassy in Pyongyang (reopened 2024 after three-year closure) |
| North Korea–Pakistan nexus | India has explicitly flagged concern over missile and nuclear technology transfers between Pyongyang and Islamabad as a direct threat to Indian security |
| Humanitarian | India has provided food aid to North Korea and supports engagement through multilateral channels |

Strategic sensitivity: India's dual engagement — deepening ties with Seoul while retaining a diplomatic channel to Pyongyang — is an expression of India's **strategic autonomy** doctrine. India does not wish to be seen as a party to any bloc-based isolation of North Korea, while simultaneously making clear that proliferation linkages with Pakistan are unacceptable.

UPSC RELEVANCE

GS Paper 2 — International Relations:

- **India's bilateral diplomacy:** Rajnath Singh's two-nation tour (Vietnam + South Korea) illustrates India's active defence diplomacy in East and Southeast Asia — a key component of its Act East Policy.
- **Special Strategic Partnership (2015):** Understand the pillars of the partnership and how each summit progressively deepens them.
- **Defence MoU significance:** Cyber defence MoUs represent the new frontier of bilateral security agreements. This MoU is notable for being defence-sector specific (as opposed to broader IT or commercial cyber agreements).
- **Korea as Indo-Pacific partner:** South Korea's strategic value to India's Indo-Pacific architecture — without being a Quad member — is a nuanced topic for mains essays and IR questions.
- **North Korea–Pakistan nexus:** India's concern about missile technology proliferation flows directly into questions on non-proliferation, MTCR, and regional security.

GS Paper 3 — Science & Technology / Internal Security:

- **Defence co-production under Aatmanirbhar Bharat:** K9 Vajra-T with ~60% localisation is a model case study for India's defence **indigenisation** push.
- **KIND-X:** India–Korea Defence Accelerator parallels INDUS-X (India–US) — both are examined together as examples of technology-driven defence partnership models.
- **Cyber defence cooperation:** Institutionalised cyber threat information sharing between two technologically advanced militaries — fits under critical infrastructure protection and cyber security policy.

Prelims — Likely MCQ angles:

- Year of Special Strategic Partnership: **2015**
 - K9 Vajra-T: calibre, OEM, production partner, location
 - KIND-X: full form and analogous platform
 - NDC (India) and KNDU pairing
 - India's position on North Korea denuclearisation
-

FACTS CORNER

| FACT | DETAIL |
|--|--|
| India–South Korea diplomatic relations established | 1973 |
| Special Strategic Partnership elevated | 2015 (during PM Modi’s visit to Seoul) |
| India–South Korea bilateral trade (FY 2024–25) | ~\$27 billion |
| Bilateral trade target by 2030 | \$50 billion |
| South Korea’s FDI rank in India | 13th (cumulative ~\$6.9 billion, April 2000 – September 2025) |
| K9 Vajra-T calibre | 155 mm / 52-calibre |
| K9 Vajra-T range (standard) | Up to 30 km ; up to 41.6 km (ERFB rounds) |
| K9 Vajra-T OEM (Korea) | Hanwha Aerospace |
| K9 Vajra-T Indian production partner | Larsen & Toubro (L&T), Hazira, Gujarat |
| Total K9 Vajra-T guns ordered | 200 (100 + 100) |
| Localisation content (Batch 2) | ~60% |
| MoU signed May 20, 2026 | Defence Cyber Cooperation |
| Institutional agreement signed | NDC India – Korea National Defence University (KNDU) |
| India–Korea Defence Accelerator | KIND-X (modelled on India–US INDUS-X) |
| South Korea’s Indo-Pacific Strategy released | December 2022 |
| South Korean president’s state visit to India | April 2026 (President Lee Jae-myung) |
| India’s embassy in Pyongyang | Reopened 2024 after 3-year closure |
| Rajnath Singh’s two-nation tour | Vietnam + South Korea, May 18–21, 2026 |
| Indian troops at UN peacekeeping | India is among the top troop contributors to UN peacekeeping (4th globally as of 2025, behind Nepal, Rwanda, and Bangladesh) |

Sources: [Ministry of Defence](#), [PIB](#)[← NEWER ARTICLE](#)[SMILE Mission: ESA-China Joint Satellite to Map Earth's...](#)[OLDER ARTICLE →](#)[Maharashtra Signs Nuclear MoUs Worth ₹6.5L Crore for 25,400...](#)

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