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EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

# Strategic Spark in India– South Korea Defence Ties

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**Bharat Choudhary**

UPSC Educator &amp; Content Creator

 [linkedin.com/in/epicbharat](https://www.linkedin.com/in/epicbharat)

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# Strategic Spark in India–South Korea Defence Ties

 The Hindu

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## INTERVIEW ANGLE

*"South Korea is not a Quad member yet has significant defence and technology convergence with India — how should India balance Quad commitments with deepening ties with non-Quad Indo-Pacific partners?"*

## EDITORIAL SUMMARY:

The Hindu argues that Rajnath Singh's May 19–20 Seoul visit — capped by three MoUs on cyber, defence education, and peacekeeping — is a strategic inflection point for India–South Korea defence ties. The K9 Vajra-T co-production success has proven the template. Convergent pressures — North Korean aggression and Chinese assertiveness — make deeper co-production in submarines, aerospace, and maritime domains not merely desirable but strategically necessary.

## A PARTNERSHIP BUILT ON ONE GUN — AND READY FOR MORE

When Rajnath Singh landed in Seoul on May 19, 2026, the India–South Korea defence relationship had one unmistakable flagship to point to: the **K9 Vajra-T**. The 155 mm self-propelled howitzer, co-produced by **Hanwha Aerospace and Larsen & Toubro** at the Hazira facility in Gujarat, is India's most successful major defence co-production programme under Atmanirbhar Bharat. India inducted 100 guns in Batch 1 (2018–2021); a Batch 2 order of 100 more, approved in late 2024, carries approximately **60% localisation** — meaning Korean components are being replaced by Indian manufacturing in real time.

The visit produced **three MoUs**: on cyber cooperation, on academic linkage between India's **National Defence College (NDC)** and South Korea's **Korean National Defence University (KNDU)**, and on UN peacekeeping collaboration. These are not weapons deals — they are the institutional architecture that precedes weapons deals. And the implicit message of the visit was clear: the two sides believe the K9 template can be replicated across wider domains.

## THE STRATEGIC LOGIC: WHY BOTH SIDES NEED THIS NOW

India and South Korea share a strategic environment that has deteriorated sharply in the past two years.

### For South Korea:

- North Korea's ballistic and cruise missile tests have accelerated, with the Kim-Putin arms transfer arrangement bringing Russian technology into Pyongyang's programme.
- China's assertiveness in the Taiwan Strait and South China Sea creates a secondary front for Seoul's security planners.
- Seoul's US alliance remains the cornerstone — but South Korean strategists are increasingly seeking to diversify defence relationships beyond the US-Japan-Australia triangle.

### For India:

- The LAC (Line of Actual Control) remains a live contested boundary with China, despite the October 2024 disengagement agreement covering Depsang and Demchok.
- Operation Sindoor (May 2025) demonstrated that India must simultaneously manage a Pakistan contingency while holding the northern front.
- Atmanirbhar Bharat demands domestic production — but India lacks the industrial base in several critical domains (submarines, advanced artillery, aerospace engines) and needs co-production partners.

The convergence is structurally sound: both nations want to reduce single-supplier dependence, both face a China-linked threat gradient, and both have industrial capabilities the other lacks.

## THE K9 TEMPLATE: WHAT MADE IT WORK

The K9 Vajra-T succeeded for reasons that are replicable:

SUCCESS FACTOR	DETAIL
Government-to-Government framework	MoD-level agreement defining IP boundaries before L&T-Hanwha commercial contract
Phased localisation	Batch 1 at ~30%; Batch 2 at ~60% — progressive transfer of manufacturing know-how
Private sector partner	L&T (not a PSU) brought project management discipline and international standards
Defined operational requirement	Indian Army's mountain artillery need was precise; design changes were bounded
Proven platform	K9 already in ROK Army service — India was not funding development risk

The lesson: co-production works when the platform is proven, the localisation roadmap is contractually binding, and the private sector (not just DPSUs) is the manufacturing partner.

## WHAT COMES NEXT: THE LOGICAL EXPANSION

### Submarines — KSS-III Jangbogo-III with Lithium-Ion Propulsion

India's **P-75I (India)** programme seeks six advanced Air-Independent Propulsion (AIP) conventional submarines. South Korea's **KSS-III Jangbogo-class** is among the world's most advanced non-nuclear submarines, incorporating lithium-ion batteries (replacing the earlier lead-acid systems) for extended submerged endurance. A co-development path — with Mazagon Dock Shipbuilders (MDL) as the Indian industrial partner — would be the most consequential defence co-production agreement India has signed in the surface-to-subsurface transition.

### Aerospace — KAI and HAL

Korea Aerospace Industries (KAI) and Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL) have had exploratory discussions on the **KF-21 Boramae** advanced jet trainer/fighter. Subsystem cooperation — avionics, EW suites, engine accessories — is the realistic near-term scope. This also feeds India's **AMCA (Advanced Medium Combat Aircraft)** programme, where aero-engine technology remains a gap.

### KIND-X Defence Accelerator

The Korean-Indian Defence Accelerator (KIND-X) — a bilateral defence start-up challenge — should be scaled with co-funding from India's **iDEX** and South Korea's **Defense Acquisition Programme Administration (DAPA)** innovation cells. Target areas: counter-UAS systems, autonomous maritime sensors, and AI-enabled surveillance.

## THE ALLIANCE GEOMETRY: QUAD-PLUS WITHOUT FORMAL ALLIANCE

South Korea is not a **Quad** member. The Quad (India, US, Japan, Australia) is a security grouping that South Korea has watched from the sidelines — partly because full participation would provoke Beijing and risk its \$300 billion bilateral trade relationship with China.

India’s approach should not push Seoul toward formal Quad membership. Instead, the **Quad-Plus geometry** — where non-member partners engage in specific domains (maritime domain awareness, **critical minerals**, cyber) without taking on full alliance obligations — offers a lower-friction path. India-ROK bilateral maritime exercises, combined with India’s existing MILAN and Malabar frameworks, can build interoperability incrementally.

The **India-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF)** already includes both India and South Korea. The defence-industrial partnership can ride alongside IPEF’s supply-chain **resilience** pillar — with critical minerals, semiconductors, and defence components flowing through a common framework.

## UPSC MAINS ANALYSIS

**GS Paper 2 — India and its bilateral/multilateral relations | GS Paper 3 — Defence and security**

PAPER	ANGLE
GS2 — Bilateral IR	India-ROK Special Strategic Partnership, MoUs, Quad-Plus geometry, IPEF
GS2 — Security	North Korea threat, Kim-Putin arms deal, ROK security calculus
GS3 — Defence	K9 Vajra-T co-production, Atmanirbhar Bharat, P-75I submarine programme
GS3 — Economy	Bilateral trade (~\$27 billion in 2024-25), semiconductor dependence, KIND-X

### Key arguments:

- K9 Vajra-T is the gold standard of Make-in-India defence co-production; its success is the proof-of-concept for replication in submarines and aerospace.
- Convergent threat environments (China + DPRK) make a deeper India-ROK partnership strategically rational for both capitals, independent of any US pressure.
- A Quad-Plus architecture including South Korea in maritime domain awareness avoids forcing Seoul into a formal alliance choice that risks its China trade relationship.

### Counterarguments:

- South Korea’s GSOMIA-linked US end-use monitoring restricts technology transfer to third parties — India cannot receive certain ROK platforms without US approval, limiting **strategic autonomy**.

- India’s defence PSUs (HAL, MDL) have a poor record of absorbing co-production technology; co-development requires private sector primacy that DRDO and DPSU culture may resist.

**Mains Keywords:** K9 Vajra-T, Hanwha Aerospace, L&T Hazira, P-75I India programme, KSS-III Jangbogo, AIP submarine, KIND-X, iDEX, DAPA, Special Strategic Partnership 2015, Quad-Plus, IPEF, NDC-KNDU MoU, Kim-Putin arms transfer, Atmanirbhar Bharat, KF-21 Boramae, AMCA.

### Prelims Facts Corner

ITEM	FACT
India-ROK Special Strategic Partnership	Elevated May 2015 during PM Modi’s Seoul visit
K9 Vajra-T	Hanwha Aerospace + L&T; Hazira, Gujarat; 100 guns Batch 1 (2018–21)
K9 Batch 2 localisation	~60%
Rajnath Singh Seoul visit	May 19–20, 2026; three MoUs signed
MoUs signed	Cyber cooperation; NDC-KNDU academic linkage; UN peacekeeping
India-ROK bilateral trade	~\$27 billion (FY 2024-25)
KSS-III Jangbogo	South Korea’s advanced conventional submarine — lithium-ion propulsion
P-75I India	India’s programme for 6 advanced AIP conventional submarines
KIND-X	Korean-Indian Defence Accelerator — bilateral start-up innovation
KAI	Korea Aerospace Industries
DAPA	Defense Acquisition Programme Administration (South Korea)
IPEF	Indo-Pacific Economic Framework — includes India and ROK

*The Hindu’s view is that the India-South Korea defence relationship has been waiting for a catalyst beyond K9 Vajra-T, and the Rajnath Singh visit provides it. The three MoUs are building blocks, not endpoints. The real test will come when both governments decide whether to move from licence production — where South Korea retains IP — to co-development, where both nations own what they build together. That shift, from buyer-seller to co-creator, is the one that changes the character of the partnership permanently.*

Sources: [The Hindu](#), [PIB](#), [Ministry of Defence](#), [DAPA South Korea](#)

#### • KEY ARGUMENTS AT A GLANCE

**Rajnath Singh's Seoul visit and the three MoUs signed — on cyber cooperation, NDC-KNDU academic linkage, and peacekeeping — signal that the K9 Vajra-T has proven the co-production template; India and South Korea must now scale into submarines, aerospace, and maritime domains where their threat convergences and industrial complementarities are sharpest.**

✓ **SUPPORTING**

- K9 Vajra-T — co-produced by Hanwha Aerospace and L&T at Hazira with ~60% localisation in Batch 2 — is the most successful major defence co-production programme under Atmanirbhar Bharat and is the proof-of-concept the entire bilateral defence architecture should replicate.
- India's LAC tensions with China and South Korea's exposure to North Korean ballistic missiles and Kim-Putin arms transfers create a shared threat environment that makes deeper defence cooperation strategically rational for both capitals.
- South Korea's KSS-III Jangbogo-class submarine with lithium-ion propulsion offers India a credible alternative to ageing HDW-type conventional submarines; joint development or co-production would align with India's P-75I (India) submarine programme requirements.
- South Korea's semiconductor and display exports to India (~\$27 billion bilateral trade in 2024-25) provide the technology corridor through which a defence-industrial partnership can be embedded in a broader critical-minerals and supply-chain resilience framework.

⚠ **COUNTER**

South Korea operates under tight US end-use monitoring on defence exports as a US treaty ally; this constrains technology transfer to India and complicates India's strategic autonomy doctrine, which resists supply-chain integration with alliance networks.

→ **WAY FORWARD**

India should propose a KIND-X (Korean-Indian Defence Accelerator) expansion into submarine propulsion and aerospace, negotiate a Co-Development Agreement with shared IP (not just licence production), and develop a Quad-Plus geometry that includes South Korea in maritime domain awareness without requiring formal alliance commitments.

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**MAINS ANSWER FRAMEWORK**
**QUESTION**

*The India–South Korea Special Strategic Partnership remains below its potential despite the K9 Vajra-T co-production success. Identify the convergent strategic interests and recommend measures to deepen defence-industrial cooperation. (250 words)*

**INTRODUCTION**

Rajnath Singh's visit to Seoul on May 19–20, 2026 — resulting in three MoUs covering cyber cooperation, NDC-KNDU academic exchange, and UN peacekeeping — reflects a defence relationship that has moved beyond transactional arms sales. The visit came against the backdrop of the K9 Vajra-T's proven success and a shared threat environment shaped by Chinese assertiveness and North Korean belligerence.

**BODY**

The India–South Korea Special Strategic Partnership, elevated in May 2015 during Prime Minister Modi's Seoul visit, is built on the K9 Vajra-T howitzer as its flagship defence programme. Hanwha Aerospace and Larsen & Toubro co-produce the 155 mm self-propelled artillery gun at the Hazira facility in Gujarat.

India ordered 100 guns in the first tranche, inducted between 2018 and 2021; a Batch 2 order of 100 more guns was approved in late 2024 with approximately 60% localisation — meaning South Korean components are being replaced by Indian manufacturing. This is the Make-in-India defence template in its most successful form to date.

Yet the partnership's scope beyond K9 has been limited. South Korea has proposed several platforms — the K2 Black Panther main battle tank, the KSS-III conventional submarine with lithium-ion Air-Independent Propulsion (AIP), and KAI's KF-21 Boramae fighter — but none has moved beyond preliminary discussion.

The strategic case for acceleration is now stronger than ever. North Korea's missile programme, accelerated by arms transfers under the Kim-Putin alignment, poses an existential threat to Seoul. India's two-front threat calculus — China on the LAC and Pakistan — has intensified post-Operation Sindoor. Both nations are Quad-adjacent without being formal alliance partners, and both seek to reduce dependence on single supplier states for defence equipment.

The Rajnath Singh MoUs are institutional building blocks. A cyber-cooperation MoU creates a channel for threat-intelligence sharing.

The NDC-KNDU (National Defence College–Korean National Defence University) academic MoU enables officer exchange and strategic studies collaboration. UN peacekeeping cooperation opens a framework for joint training and interoperability that does not require formal alliance commitments. These are the precursors to co-development agreements with shared intellectual property — the step change that would turn a transactional partnership into a structural one. The defence-industrial opportunity extends into maritime platforms.

India’s P-75I submarine programme seeks six advanced conventional submarines; South Korea’s KSS-III with lithium-ion propulsion is a credible contender. A co-development path — with HAL and Korean Aerospace Industries (KAI) sharing subsystem design — could also advance both nations’ aerospace ambitions.

### CONCLUSION

The geopolitical logic for a deeper India–South Korea defence partnership is compelling: convergent threat perceptions, complementary industrial capabilities, and a shared interest in an open Indo-Pacific. The K9 Vajra-T has shown the model works.

What is needed now is political will to move from licence production to co-development — with shared IP, joint R&D funding, and a supply-chain architecture that anchors Korean manufacturers in India’s defence corridors.

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CURATED &amp; WRITTEN BY

## Bharat Choudhary

UPSC Educator &amp; Content Creator

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