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Indian War Memorial in Seoul: 75 Years of Korean War Commemoration

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WHY IN NEWS

On **May 21, 2026**, Defence Minister **Rajnath Singh** and the Republic of Korea's **Minister of Patriots and Veterans Affairs, Kwon Oh-eul**, jointly inaugurated the **Indian War Memorial** at **Imjingak Park, Paju** — adjacent to the **Demilitarized Zone (DMZ)** north-west of Seoul. The memorial commemorates **75 years of the Korean War (1950–1953)** and honours India's two principal contributions to the conflict and its aftermath: the **60 Parachute Field Ambulance** ("Maroon Angels") under Lt Col A.G. Rangaraj and the **Custodian Force of India (CFI)** under General K.S. Thimayya. A bilateral **MoU on cooperation in veterans affairs, military history exchange and youth exchange programmes** was also signed. The inauguration formed the closing leg of Rajnath Singh's Seoul visit (May 19–21, 2026) which earlier produced a Defence Cyber Cooperation MoU (covered in the May 20 edition).

THE INDIAN WAR MEMORIAL AT IMJINGAK: WHAT IT HONOURS

The memorial is located inside **Imjingak Peace Park**, Paju — built in 1972 on the southern bank of the **Imjin River**, roughly **7 km south of the Military Demarcation Line (MDL)** that divides the two Koreas. The site is one of South Korea's most symbolically important Cold-War-era spaces, housing the Freedom Bridge, the Bell of Peace and several memorials to UN Command contingents.

The Indian memorial features:

- A central commemorative plaque honouring the **60 Parachute Field Ambulance** of the Indian Army.
- A bust of **Lieutenant Colonel A.G. Rangaraj, Maha Vir Chakra (MVC)** — first commander of 60 Para Field Ambulance during its Korean deployment (1950–1954).
- A bust of **General Kodendera Subayya Thimayya** — Chairman of the **Neutral Nations Repatriation Commission (NNRC)** and Commander of the **Custodian Force of India (CFI)** (1953–54). Thimayya later became **Chief of the Army Staff (1957–1961)**.
- Interpretive panels in Korean and English describing India's medical and custodial contribution to the war and the armistice that followed.

Alongside the inauguration, India and South Korea signed an **MoU between the Ministry of Defence (India) and the Ministry of Patriots and Veterans Affairs (ROK)** covering:

- **Veterans' welfare and reciprocal recognition** of war veterans and descendants
- **Joint research and exchange on shared military history** (1950–54)
- **Youth and student exchange programmes** focused on Korean War history and peacekeeping
- Periodic **commemorative events** at sites of Indian operation, including **Munsan-ni**

THE KOREAN WAR (1950–1953): HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The Korean War is widely regarded as the **first hot war of the Cold War** and the **first military enforcement action authorised by the United Nations Security Council**. Its consequences — a divided peninsula, a sustained US security presence in East Asia, and the formal entry of the People's Republic of China into great-power confrontation — continue to shape the regional order in 2026.

Korean War Timeline

DATE	EVENT
25 June 1950	Korean People's Army (North Korea, under Kim Il-sung) crosses the 38th parallel , invading the Republic of Korea
25 June 1950	UNSC Resolution 82 — declares the invasion a breach of the peace, demands withdrawal
27 June 1950	UNSC Resolution 83 — recommends UN members furnish military assistance to South Korea
7 July 1950	UNSC Resolution 84 — establishes the Unified Command (UN Command) under US leadership; General Douglas MacArthur appointed Commander
15 September 1950	Inchon Landing — UN forces reverse the North Korean advance
October 1950	UN forces cross the 38th parallel northward
October–November 1950	People's Volunteer Army (PVA) of China — under Marshal Peng Dehuai — enters the war, pushing UN forces back south
April 1951	MacArthur dismissed by President Truman; Gen. Matthew Ridgway takes over
July 1951	Armistice negotiations begin at Kaesong, later moved to Panmunjom
27 July 1953	Korean Armistice Agreement signed at Panmunjom — establishes the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) along the Military Demarcation Line
No date	No formal peace treaty has ever been concluded — the two Koreas remain technically at war

Why the UN could act in 1950: The Security Council resolutions authorising force were possible only because the **Soviet Union was boycotting the UNSC** at the time — in protest against the **Republic of China (Taiwan)** continuing to hold the Chinese seat instead of the newly proclaimed **People's Republic of China**. This is a frequently tested UPSC fact: had the USSR been present, it would have vetoed Resolutions 82 and 83.

Scale of the war: Estimates of total casualties (military and civilian, all sides) range from **3 to 4.5 million**. Sixteen nations contributed combat forces under the UN Command; **five additional nations — including India — contributed medical and humanitarian units**.

INDIA'S ROLE: NON-ALIGNED BUT ENGAGED

India's response to the Korean War is a cornerstone case study in **Nehruvian non-alignment in practice** — neither passive neutrality nor bloc affiliation, but **active mediation** combined with **humanitarian contribution**.

Diplomatic Position

- India **voted in favour of UNSC Resolutions 82 and 83**, condemning the North Korean invasion and authorising military assistance.
- India **declined to send combat troops** despite the Resolution 83 call — limiting its contribution to a medical unit and, later, custodian forces.
- This dual posture — moral condemnation plus military restraint — became the template for later Indian responses to Cold War conflicts and is studied as the operational meaning of **non-alignment**.
- Prime Minister **Jawaharlal Nehru** corresponded directly with **Joseph Stalin, Zhou Enlai, and US Secretary of State Dean Acheson** to keep diplomatic channels open and to dissuade escalation, including the use of nuclear weapons threatened by the US.

60 Parachute Field Ambulance — the “Maroon Angels”

The **60 Parachute Field Ambulance** was deployed to Korea in **November 1950** as part of India's contribution to the UN Command. Key facts:

- **Strength:** 627 personnel (including officers) — the largest non-combat Indian deployment of its time.
- **Commanding Officer: Lieutenant Colonel A.G. Rangaraj, MVC** — a parachute-qualified Army Medical Corps officer.
- **Duration of deployment:** 1950 to 1954 — across the entire war and into the post-armistice phase.
- **Patient load:** Over **222,000 patients** treated, including **2,300+ field surgeries** under combat conditions.
- **Operations:** The unit operated **mobile surgical teams** behind the front line, supporting Commonwealth Brigade and Royal Australian Regiment formations. It was the **first Indian military medical unit to be combat-deployed under the UN flag**.
- **Honours:** The unit and its commander received **honours from both the Republic of Korea and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea** after the war — a near-unique distinction reflecting India's perceived impartiality.
- **Maha Vir Chakra:** Rangaraj was awarded the **MVC** — India's second-highest gallantry award — for his service in Korea, the only MVC awarded for a non-combat foreign deployment.

- **Lineage:** 60 Para Field Ambulance remains an active unit of the **Indian Army's Parachute Brigade**, with its colour traditions preserved.

The Custodian Force of India (CFI) and the NNRC

The most operationally complex Indian contribution came **after** the shooting stopped — in the disposition of **prisoners of war (POWs)**.

The **Korean Armistice Agreement (July 27, 1953)** created the **Neutral Nations Repatriation Commission (NNRC)** to handle POWs who refused repatriation to their home countries. Composition of the NNRC:

COUNTRY	BLOC ALIGNMENT	ROLE
India	Non-aligned	Chairman — General K.S. Thimayya
Sweden	Western-aligned	Member
Switzerland	Western-aligned	Member
Poland	Communist bloc	Member
Czechoslovakia	Communist bloc	Member

To execute the NNRC's mandate, India provided the **Custodian Force of India (CFI)** — approximately **5,000 troops plus 6,000 administrative and medical personnel**, also led by **Lt Gen K.S. Thimayya**.

CFI operations:

- **Location:** Camps clustered around **Munsan-ni**, near the DMZ.
- **POWs handled:** Over **22,500 prisoners** — including **22,000 Chinese and North Korean** prisoners who refused repatriation, plus **approximately 359 UN Command prisoners** (Americans, British, Koreans) who similarly declined return.
- **Mandate:** Provide custody, medical care, and access to “explanations” by representatives of the side they refused to return to — without coercion in either direction.
- **Outcome:** Of the prisoners held, the vast majority were eventually released as civilians; a contested minority of UN-Command prisoners chose to remain in China — a Cold-War cause célèbre.

India's role in chairing the NNRC and providing the CFI is recognised by historians as **the most operationally demanding peacekeeping-style task undertaken by India in the 1950s** — predating its first formal UN Peacekeeping deployment (UNEF, Suez, 1956).

INDIA–REPUBLIC OF KOREA RELATIONS: THE STRATEGIC FRAME IN 2026

The memorial inauguration sits within a long arc of upgrading India–RoK ties. The two countries marked the **50th anniversary of diplomatic relations in 2023**, and bilateral engagement has accelerated through 2025–26.

India–RoK Relationship Timeline

MILESTONE	YEAR	SIGNIFICANCE
Diplomatic relations established	1973	Resident embassies opened
Long-term Cooperative Partnership for Peace and Prosperity	2004	First formal partnership framework
Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) signed	2009	Preferential trade framework
CEPA enters into force	1 January 2010	Tariff liberalisation begins
Upgraded to Strategic Partnership	2010	First strategic-tier upgrade
Elevated to Special Strategic Partnership	2015	During PM Modi’s Seoul visit
Joint Strategic Vision 2026–2030	April 2026	“Chips to Ships” framework with 25 outcomes
Defence Cyber Cooperation MoU	20 May 2026	Rajnath Singh’s Seoul visit
Indian War Memorial at Imjingak inaugurated	21 May 2026	75 years of Korean War

Bilateral trade (FY 2024–25): Approximately **\$25–27 billion** two-way; joint target of **\$50 billion by 2030**.

Korean conglomerates in India: Samsung, LG, Hyundai, POSCO, Kia, Hyosung, HD Hyundai, SK Hynix. Many of these entered India in the mid-1990s — well before “Make in India” — making them legacy contributors to Indian manufacturing.

Defence Pillars of the Special Strategic Partnership

PILLAR	STATUS (2026)
K9 Vajra-T self-propelled howitzer	Co-produced by Hanwha Aerospace and L&T at Hazira (Gujarat) ; Batch 2 approved late 2024 — additional 100 units. Flagship platform.
Naval cooperation	Talks under way on Hanwha Ocean participation in Indian minesweeper and submarine programmes
2+2 Vice-Ministerial Dialogue	Defence and Foreign Affairs Vice-Ministers — institutionalised channel
KIND-X (Korean–Indian Defence Accelerator)	Launched April 2026 — joint start-up and dual-use technology fund
DAPA–DRDO ties	Defence Acquisition Programme Administration (RoK) and Defence Research & Development Organisation (India) on joint R&D
Cyber defence	New domain — MoU signed 20 May 2026
UN Peacekeeping cooperation	Joint training and coordination

STRATEGIC SIGNIFICANCE OF THE IMJINGAK INAUGURATION

- 1. Site symbolism.** Imjingak is the closest civilian-accessible point to the DMZ. Locating an Indian memorial here — alongside memorials to US, UK, Australian, Turkish, and other UN Command contributors — formally **insets India into the symbolic geography of Korean War remembrance**. Until 2026, India’s role was acknowledged primarily in Seoul’s War Memorial of Korea museum but not in the front-line memorial belt.
- 2. Reciprocity for 1953.** South Korea’s gesture closes a 73-year loop: India was the **chair of the NNRC**, the body that disposed of Korean War POWs and enabled the armistice to hold. Korean public memory recognises this; the memorial formalises it at state level.
- 3. Signal of strategic alignment.** Coming alongside the **Defence Cyber Cooperation MoU** and the **NDC–KNDU agreement** (May 20), the memorial is the cultural-historical anchor of an accelerating **defence-industrial relationship** spanning artillery, naval platforms, semiconductors, and shipbuilding.
- 4. Indo-Pacific context.** Both India and South Korea face a **rising China and a nuclear-armed North Korea** in their immediate strategic vicinities. Public commemoration of shared sacrifice — including Indian sacrifice — is a **soft-power scaffold** for the harder cooperation now under way.
- 5. Veterans diplomacy.** The MoU on veterans affairs creates **descendant-level engagement** — pensions recognition, joint commemoration travel, and curriculum exchange. This builds public constituencies for the partnership on both sides.

AREAS OF EXPANDING DEFENCE COOPERATION

AREA	KOREAN LEAD	STATUS
Artillery	Hanwha Aerospace (K9 Vajra)	Batch 2 (100 units) approved 2024
Minesweepers / naval platforms	Hanwha Ocean	Talks under way
Submarines (conventional, AIP)	Hanwha Ocean / HD Hyundai	Project-75I discussions
Cyber defence	DAPA / RoK MND	MoU signed 20 May 2026
Defence start-ups	KIND-X (April 2026)	Joint accelerator
Semiconductors (dual-use)	Samsung, SK Hynix	India-led incentives under SPECS / ISM
Shipbuilding tech transfer	HD Hyundai	Cochin Shipyard / L&T cooperation

UPSC RELEVANCE

GS Paper 1 – History, Society

- **Post-WWII world order:** Korean War as the first major test of the UN collective security system; the Cold War's eastward extension; decolonisation backdrop.
- **India's foreign policy in the Nehru era:** Non-alignment in practice; mediation diplomacy; the principled-but-engaged Indian position.
- **Military history:** 60 Para Field Ambulance and the Indian Army Medical Corps; K.S. Thimayya as a 20th-century Indian military statesman.

GS Paper 2 – Polity, IR

- **India–Republic of Korea bilateral relations:** Special Strategic Partnership, CEPA, defence cooperation, “Chips to Ships” framework.
- **India's role in international peacekeeping and mediation:** NNRC as a pre-UNEF Indian contribution; UN Command and UNSC Resolutions 82, 83, 84.
- **Indo-Pacific strategy:** India's middle-power partnerships; soft-power instruments such as memorial diplomacy.

GS Paper 3 – Defence (linked)

- **Defence indigenisation:** K9 Vajra-T as case study of foreign OEM + Indian private-sector co-production under Make in India.

- **Dual-use technology:** Semiconductors, shipbuilding, and cyber as integrated defence-economic pillars.

Possible Mains questions

- 1 “India’s role in the Korean War (1950–53) illustrates the operational content of non-alignment more clearly than any single doctrine document.” Examine. **(GS2)**
- 2 Trace the evolution of India–Republic of Korea relations from 1973 to 2026 and assess the strategic logic of the ‘Special Strategic Partnership’. **(GS2)**
- 3 How did the Neutral Nations Repatriation Commission (1953) shape India’s later approach to UN peacekeeping? **(GS1/GS2)**

FACTS CORNER

- **Korean War dates:** 25 June 1950 – 27 July 1953 (armistice). **No peace treaty.**
- **UNSC Resolutions on Korea:** **82** (25 June 1950 – breach of peace), **83** (27 June 1950 – military assistance), **84** (7 July 1950 – Unified Command under US).
- **Why UNSC could act:** **USSR was boycotting** the Council over the PRC seat being held by Taiwan.
- **UN Command first head:** Gen. **Douglas MacArthur** (US).
- **Chinese intervention:** **People’s Volunteer Army** under Marshal **Peng Dehuai**, October–November 1950.
- **Armistice signed at:** **Panmunjom**, 27 July 1953 – established the **DMZ**.
- **60 Parachute Field Ambulance:** 627 personnel; treated **over 222,000 patients**; deployed 1950–54; commanded by **Lt Col A.G. Rangaraj, MVC**. Now part of the **Indian Army Parachute Brigade**.
- **Custodian Force of India (CFI):** Approx. **5,000 troops + 6,000 admin**; commanded by **Lt Gen K.S. Thimayya**; based at **Munsan-ni**; handled **22,500+ POWs**.
- **Neutral Nations Repatriation Commission (NNRC) – 5 members:** India (Chair), Sweden, Switzerland, Poland, Czechoslovakia.
- **K.S. Thimayya:** Later **Chief of the Army Staff, 1957–1961**.
- **Indian War Memorial location:** **Imjingak Park, Paju**, Gyeonggi-do – approx. 7 km south of the Military Demarcation Line; ~55 km north-west of Seoul.
- **India–RoK diplomatic relations:** Established **1973**.
- **Special Strategic Partnership:** **2015** (PM Modi’s Seoul visit).
- **CEPA:** Signed **2009**; in force **1 January 2010**.

- **India–RoK bilateral trade (FY 2024–25):** Approximately **\$25–27 billion**.
- **Flagship co-production: K9 Vajra-T** howitzer — Hanwha Aerospace + L&T (Hazira); Batch 2 (100 units) approved late 2024.
- **KIND-X (Korean–Indian Defence Accelerator):** Launched April 2026.

Sources: [PIB](#), [MEA](#), [The Hindu](#)

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