

## **‘S. Korea wants to elevate ties with India’**

Written by Administrator

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**‘S. Korea wants to elevate ties with India’** Stanly Johny Expert says Seoul wants to strengthen ties on economic and strategic fronts

One of the major foreign policy initiatives of President Moon Jae-in of South Korea is the government’s ‘New Southern Policy’, with a goal of deepening ties with South East Asian nations as well as India and building an inclusive regional architecture in Asia, said an expert.

In an interaction with a group of Indian journalists, Choe Wongi, head of the Centre for ASEAN-India Studies at Korea National Diplomatic Academy, said there were similarities “between our approach and that of India towards regional issues”.

### **Concerns about BRI**

“India wants to be more vocal about maritime security in the region. We are aware of it. There are increasing activities by China in the Indian Ocean region. There are concerns about the BRI (Belt and Road Initiative)... Nobody is appreciating what they are doing in the South China Sea. But a confrontational approach is not good,” he said. “China is... the largest trading partner of most countries in Asia. Whether we like China or not, we have to live with it,” said Mr. Choe, who’s involved in training South Korean diplomats.

He added that South Korea’s main policy objective was not to get subsumed into the U.S.-China rivalry in Asia. “The U.S. Indo-Pacific policy is simple. We have to play by the rules. There are no exceptions. Even China is not an exception... [I]f the U.S. takes an aggressive approach, we can’t be part of it. That’s the message from regional countries. What we need is an inclusive regional architecture in Asia.”

He added that South Korea, as part of this strategy, wants to build stronger ties with ASEAN and India on multiple fronts — economic, bilateral and strategic. “India is the main partner in expanding our economy in the South. Rising unemployment is a major problem. The economy is in a stagnant state. We have to expand and diversify our economic portfolio,” Mr. Choe said.

India and South Korea have agreed to boost bilateral trade to \$50 billion by 2030 from \$20 billion now.

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At the diplomatic level, Mr. Choe said Seoul wanted to elevate ties with India to the level of those with four other major powers around the Korean Peninsula — the U.S., China, Russia and Japan. Asked about South Korea’s approach towards the BRI, he said: “We welcome BRI. But China is pursuing BRI projects unilaterally or bilaterally. That’s the problem... We want BRI to be more open and transparent.”

Hyun Oh-Seok, a former Finance Minister of South Korea, said countries that are part of the BRI projects and borrow money from China should be cautious. “Recipient countries should be cautious with China. You can blame China. But the recipient countries should also be blamed,” he said, referring to allegations of debt trap weaker countries get into while welcoming China to build big-ticket infrastructure projects. “There has to be some kind of rules to deal with debt trap, etc. We have to set the rules,” he said.

Mr. Hyun, who’s an adviser at the Beijing-led Asian Infrastructure Bank, said India has huge potential to play a bigger role in international politics. “It might play a bigger role in the coming years.”

(The correspondent was in Seoul at an invitation from the Korea Foundation)

Source: The Hindu