FROM ‘COLD FRIENDSHIP’ TO STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP:
THE TRANSFORMATION OF SOUTH KOREA’S
POLITICAL RELATIONS WITH INDIA

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ABSTRACT

In 2012, South Korea and India will celebrate 50 years of consular relations that have brought, for both countries, a massive transformation in their bilateral relationship. Although sharing the same tragedy of national partition and an uneasy relationship with China, South Korea and India were for decades at odds with each other. Only in recent years have the two Asian democracies recognised the threats and interests they have in common, which are primarily geared to China’s rise. This paper addresses the political relations between South Korea and India, describing in detail the development of Indo-Korean ties since World War II. It shows the paramount significance of the China factor for the Indo-Korean strategic rapprochement by analysing major common concerns and will discuss both the regional and international implications of the bilateral links between South Korea and India by exploring the prospects of an axis between the two.

Key words: South Korea, India, China factor, bilateral relations, strategic partnership, security co-operation

1 INTRODUCTION

When the president of the Republic of Korea (ROK—South Korea) Lee Myung-bak was invited by the Indian government to attend the 61st Republic Day on 26 January 2010 as chief guest—a highly symbolic gesture which India only awards to close and important partners—and, along with Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, promulgated a strategic partnership, most observers of Asian-Pacific affairs were taken by surprise, their view coloured by the former long-term cold relations between the two countries. This development, however, followed on within the framework of a changing landscape of political
affairs in the Asia-Pacific area since the demise of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR—Soviet Union). The ‘silent’ rapprochement between the ROK and India, which during the Cold War were deeply estranged from each other, was a slow process. Despite having faced similar challenges in their neighbourhood and in face of their common political interests and problems—most of which have since the end of World War II been geared to the People’s Republic of China (PRC—China)—it took South Korea and India more than three decades to recognise the advantages of strategic co-operation.

Although an increasingly hot topic in Asian-Pacific affairs, the issue of political relations between South Korea and India is still scarcely discussed in academic circles, and the meagre literature available on the subject treats the evolution and main impetus of these relations with only small attention to detail. In an attempt to fill this gap, this article explores the transformation of the political relationship between South Korea and India since World War II, the impetus of their strong political ties and the implications that result. This inevitably leads to the question: what are the prospects of a strategic axis between the ROK and India?

In determining the answer to this question, this article will deal, in the historical and generally descriptive first part, with the development of the ROK-India relationship during the Cold War and show why South Korea and India, despite shared uneasiness about a belligerent China, did not end up as strategic partners. The second part assesses the impetus of the political rapprochement between South Korea and India by analysing the major features of the enforced ROK-India ties; the author will argue here that since their respective independence, the China factor has been the major political linkage and underlying trigger. The third part will analyse the implications of developing ROK-Indian ties in view of a potential strategic axis. The article will conclude by summarising the key arguments presented in the paper and provide a short outlook on the future of Indo-Korean political relations.

2 SOUTH KOREA AND INDIA DURING THE COLD WAR: FROM MISTRUST TO ‘COLD FRIENDSHIP’

Political relations between South Korea and India have not always been as cordial and close as today. Both the ROK and India tend offi-