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Indian Foreign Policy and the ROK-India Relations in 2021

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Introduction

Any prospect of India and its relations with South Korea in 2021 is going to be necessarily posited in the milieu of India both in terms of its policy orientation in recent years as well as current events surrounding the country. India has been emerging as one of the important player in the regional economic and strategic equations in recent years. It has been one of the fastest growing large economies of the world as well as considered to be one of the important actors in the Indo-Pacific strategy. It is important, thus, to comprehend India's aspirations and as well as its capabilities to project its role and outlook in the coming year.

India's Foreign Policy Orientation

After 2014, India's domestic and external contours have changed significantly. India began to be more confident about itself and thus ready to play more active role in the making of the regional and global order. The Indian foreign policy has taken more pragmatic turn and become realistic, departing from its past hesitations. In the US-China contests in the region, India has shown clear affinity with the US postures. However, India has also tried to maintain its strategic autonomy. For example, even

though India is part of the Quadrilateral Dialogue (QUAD) with the US, Japan and Australia and in agreement with the goal of 'free and open' Indo-Pacific, it has inserted another expression 'inclusive' in it. Actually India says that it has been pursuing a policy of multi-alignment which means that on different issues it would not hesitate in working with both friendly as well as competing countries. For example, even though India has come closer to the US in recent years, it has not diluted its connections with Russia, Iran or China. Along with being an active member of the Indo-Pacific strategy, India also tried to mend its competition with China and the Indian Prime Minister had two informal summits with the Chinese President in Wuhan and Chennai in 2018 and 2019.

Furthermore, India has also energized its relations with the East Asian countries through its Act East Policy. Actually, India prefers to articulate its Indo-Pacific strategy through its Act East Policy but at the same time, it is ready to approach it through QUAD if it is necessary. India invited all the ASEAN leaders as the Chief Guests to its Republic Day celebrations in 2018 and apart from trade and economic cooperation, tried to evoke people-to-people connects by evoking its long historical and cultural relations with the region.

Current Events and Indian Foreign Policy

In 2020, India's economic growth story and its foreign policy are challenged very consequentially by the two important happenings, and they are the COVID-19 pandemic and its standoff with China at the India-China border. Both of these events which are still ongoing had important repercussion for India. The COVID-19 pandemic has led to not only health but also economic consequences for India. Indian economy was getting slowed down even before the outbreak of the pandemic and the situation has further deteriorated in recent months. In the last two quarters, Indian economy has shown -23.9 and -7.5 GDP growth rates, which is probably the worst performance in Asia. Furthermore, the pandemic has seriously affected supply chain of the Indian economy. In such a scenario, it is expected that Indian economic outlook would be much more inward orientated.

Similarly, India's border standoff with China could also be seen as watershed moment in India's foreign policy. The border dispute has probably been the most important variable in India's relations with China and both the countries fought a war in 1962 on the issue. In the last three to four decades, both countries, even though not able to resolve their border dispute, have evolved mechanism to peacefully manage the issue. There have been small incursions at the border but both of them have been

successful to restrain them. But in May 2020, at the Galwan valley, troops of both the countries had a face-off in which India suffered more than 40 casualties. The standoff would have important implications for the Indian foreign policy in the coming year.

Indian Foreign Policy in 2021

In the above context, it seems that in 2021, Indian foreign policy would move towards overt contests with China as well as establishing more layers of security mechanisms with QUAD countries both bilaterally as well as quadrilaterally. In India there are demands from the few quarters that India should work to establish an 'Asian NATO' working along with QUAD and other East Asian countries. Even though, Indian official position might not find it prudent to take such quantum jump, India is likely to move towards balancing China in a more direct manner.

Amidst the pandemic, the Indian Foreign Minister visited Tokyo to attend the second ministerial meeting of the QUAD in October 2020. India has had 2+2 meeting with the US in October 2020 and both countries signed the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA) through which both countries could share sensitive satellite data. Before that India signed the Mutual Logistics Support Agreement (MLSA) with Australia in June 2020 and a defense deal with Japan in September 2020. India also invited Australia to a trilateral joint naval exercise and made it quadrilateral.

Along with being active in forging partnerships with the QUAD countries, India has also been eager to further widen and deepen its partnerships the East Asian countries and in November 2020 at the East Asia Summit, India emphasized ASEAN centrality in its Indo-Pacific approach.

India is also eager to compensate its absence in the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (RCEP). India was part of the negotiations of the RCEP from 2012 but it decided to move out of the negotiations in November 2019. The conclusion of the RCEP without India in November 2020 means that India has to work harder to remain economically engaged with the regional countries. India would like to do by its FTAs with ASEAN, Japan and South Korea. India would like to be part of regional value chain as it is mentioned in WTO provisions, which were overtly mentioned in the joint document of the East Asia Summit in 2020. There are also talks that India may join the RCEP as an observer or become its full member at a later stage.

The ROK-India Relations: Bilateral and Regional Dynamics

The ROK-India relations are going to be affected by the trajectory of Indian foreign policy mentioned above. India and South Korea had a remarkable history of engagement in all possible domains in the last three decades. The bilateral relations have improved in economic, political, strategic, cultural, education, science and technology domains. India and South Korea signed Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA, 2009) and Special Strategic Partnership Agreement (SSPA, 2015). However, the outcomes of such Agreements are being seen as far from their potential. The CEPA provisions need to be revised, and the process is going on. The bilateral trade between the two countries got benefitted from the CEPA in the initial years but the same provisions have not been helpful in sustaining it. The bilateral trade went down and then gradually, it has again been improving. Similarly, there are demands that the SSPA must have more contents in it as both the countries generally avoid taking stands on foreign policy challenges to each other. For example, India avoids statements on South Korea's contests with Japan in East Sea or Dokdo Islands, and South Korea keeps silent on India's claim for the permanent membership of the United Nations Security Council and India's rivalry with Pakistan and China.

Fortunately, the current leaders in both the countries have recognized India and South Korea's mutual and common foreign policy objectives and complementary importance of each other in their achievements. Indian Prime Minister and the Korean President visited each other in the initial years of their terms. Both leaders have tried to establish personal connections with each other and induced more mutual trust in the last few years.

India's Act East Policy and Korea's New Southern Policy are symbolic of the fact that both the countries want to get engaged in their extended neighborhood in a more active manner. In all probability, these policies of the two countries would definitely bring them close to each other. However, both the countries still need to take up directly regional issues in their bilateral relations. The official joint pronouncements of both the countries generally talk about rule of law, institutionalization, norm building and common fight against maritime and natural disruptions in the region. But India and South Korea avoid openly sharing and coordinating their approaches towards issues such as the rise of assertiveness in China, Indo-Pacific strategy, and the role of Japan in future regional equations.

Actually, it's being said that both the countries need to look at the long-term perspective of their mutual cooperation and also try to enhance mutual trust between the two countries. At present it seems that both the countries have been looking for

immediate reciprocal gains in their engagements. Also they are reluctant to take up hard security issues relevant for the regional security in their bilateral talks and that must be reviewed.

The ROK-India in 2021

In 2021, both the countries would like to inject more trust in their relationship. They might like to do away with obstacles in their economic exchanges and most probably conclude the process of revising the CEPA. When both India and Korea are looking to diversify their trade dependence as well as their supply chains, prospect of their economic cooperation is quite promising. Actually, during the pandemic India and South Korea began to cooperate in producing medical equipment from face masks to PPE kits and ventilators to testing kits. Such cooperation is going to be further strengthened in 2021. It could also be expected that both the countries would put more meat in their bilateral security-strategic relations.

India and South Korea both are going to be more active in their reaching out to the ASEAN countries via their Act East Policy and New Southern Policy. Both the countries' active involvements are going to be complementary as both of them are going to bring different core competences to the regional countries. Whereas, India could provide cultural connects and ideas, South Korea would bring capital and technology in the region. Actually, South Korea disburses a high proportion of its ODA bilaterally through concessional loans and focuses in this region, and 11 of South Korea's 24 priority countries are in Asia.

India and South Korea both are going to be pushed to be more active towards Indo-Pacific strategy in 2021. India because of its border standoff with China and South Korea because the US pushing it more for an active involvement in the strategy. Actually, both countries participated in the QUAD+ meeting in March 2020, which was though just limited to the Covid-19 pandemic and its economic repercussions, is an important indicator that South Korea might articulate an Indo-Pacific strategy of its own sans appearing anti-China.

India and South Korea could also coordinate their efforts to bring peace and reconciliation between North and South Korea. India is one of the few countries which has had sustained diplomatic relations with North Korea, and India would be willing to assist the South to engage the North both for inter-Korea peace as well as abolition of North Korea's nuclear and missile programs. With the change of leadership in the US, it is quite probable that South Korea has to take lead in dealing with North Korea. Contrary to the Trump administration, Joe Biden might like to give more space to

Seoul in dealing with Pyongyang. South Korea in the coming year might make a network of willing middle powers to deal with North Korea, and India could be one of such partners.

Conclusion

In the context of changing contours of India's foreign policy, India would bring more realism in its approach towards the region in 2021. In spite of having its quest for strategic autonomy, India would lean more towards the US and QUAD. India would also try that its leaning towards QUAD should not mean dilution of its focus in the East Asian countries and Korea.

The ROK-India relations are going to be better in 2021 also because both the countries are structurally part of the two strongest trends: Indo-Pacific strategy as well as ASEAN central middle power interventions. It is expected that India and South Korea will have more coordination in their regional policies. India and South Korea might also cooperate in their common goal to get North Korea denuclearization. Finally, it could also be expected that the ROK-India bilateral relations would further improve in the coming year. ♣

※ Translator's note: This is a summarized unofficial translation of the original paper which was written in Korean. All references should be made to the original paper.

※ This article is written based on the author's personal opinions and does not reflect the views of the Sejong Institute.