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The East Asia Institute
#909 Sampoong B/D
158 Eulji-ro, Jung-gu
Seoul 04548
Republic of Korea

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www.eai.or.kr

Meeting between Dr. Sook Jong Lee and Ambassador Vikram Doraiswami

On Monday, September 11th, Ambassador Vikram Doraiswami met with Dr. Sook Jong Lee, President of the East Asia Institute, to discuss the current state of foreign affairs in East Asia and opportunities for cooperation and partnership between India and South Korean think tanks. The meeting covered a variety of issues, including the current security situation on the Korean Peninsula, the role of China and the changing Asian regional order, international trade, and areas in which South Korea and India might be able to strengthen their relationship. The following is a summary highlighting some of the important points of the discussion.

The meeting began with a review of the current status of Indian-Korean relations. India and Korea have strong economic and trade ties, and both sides are working on strengthening the political relationship. To this end, the past few years have seen an unprecedented number of ministerial visits including the attendance of Ambassador Cho Byeong-Jae from the Korea National Defense Diplomatic Academy at a regional think tank event hosted by Sri Lanka and supported by think tanks from India and Singapore, as well as President Moon's dispatch of a special envoy to India in the early days of his presidency. A potential visit from Korea's Foreign Minister to India is also being arranged, and there is a

strong likelihood that President Moon will visit India in 2018.

The President and the Ambassador discussed whether these efforts mark a change in the diplomatic approach of South Korea. It was felt that it could be said that South Korea's diplomacy strategy shifted under the Park Geun-hye government. Although former President Park Geun-hye entered office with an eye to continuing the middle power diplomacy of the previous administrations, and led several initiatives such as MIKTA (Mexico, Italy, Turkey, Korea, and Australia) to that effect, her time in office saw a gradual transition back towards traditional big power diplomacy. However, in order for Korea to play to its strengths, it was suggested that the government redirect the development of its diplomatic capacity beyond the four great powers that surround the country. Links and joint projects/initiatives between private think tanks can play a role in strengthening Korea's diplomatic ties beyond the immediate neighborhood of Northeast Asia, and building partnerships between Korean and Indian think tanks is one step in this direction.

The discussion then shifted to the most recent spate of tensions on the Korean Peninsula, which have once again pushed for a rebalancing of South Korea's relationship with both the US and China. South Koreans, both politicians and the

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public alike, have been mired in a state of uncertainty as North Korea's latest nuclear developments bring the security of the US nuclear umbrella into question. Despite efforts from South Korea to strengthen ties with China on a number of levels in the hopes that this would bolster political cooperation on the North Korea issue, China has remained lukewarm in its condemnation of North Korea's nuclear provocations. In addition, the fallout of China's retaliation against the installation of THAAD in Seongju has been difficult.

At the same time, there are voices within South Korea calling for the government to increase the nation's defense capabilities vis-à-vis North Korea. Since President Moon took office, although his administration has sent subtle signals that they are willing to engage with the North through low-level exchanges (the Pyeongchang Winter Olympics, for example), Kim Jong Un's regime has remained unresponsive. The advance of North Korea's nuclear technology has increased uncertainty over the American nuclear umbrella within South Korea, and the degree of public support for the deployment of tactical nuclear weapons on the Peninsula has subsequently increased. While the Trump administration has talked of deploying strategic nuclear weapons to South Korea as a deterrent, doubts remain as to whether the Trump administration is serious or if they are simply using this as a method to negotiate with Beijing. South Korea needs to receive strong and credible assurance that it remains under the protection of the American nuclear umbrella. Noting a parallel between the India-Pakistan relationship and the Inter-Korean relationship, both sides agreed that any

decisions about nuclear power should involve long and careful consideration.

In this same vein, the issue of the need for closer security cooperation between South Korea and Japan was raised, along with the historical issues between the two countries that prove an ongoing obstacle to such cooperation. As strong democratic countries within the region, India, South Korea, and Japan have the potential to cooperate more closely based on shared democratic values and interests. India and Japan have a robust economic relationship that has grown over the past decade. Currently, India is one of Japan's largest ODA recipients, and Japan is investing heavily in projects that others have shied away from in India, finding them too ambitious, such as a bullet train. In addition, India and Japan have increased their political ties in recent years, and Japan now participates in India's annual naval exercises with the US. A tripartite partnership might be one way to bridge the gap between South Korea and Japan.

Finally, Dr. Lee and the Ambassador discussed the progress of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), underscoring subregional cooperation such as the initiative between Bangladesh, India, Bhutan, and Nepal for an electricity grid, and maritime initiatives to facilitate better movement of goods and people between India, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives. The Ambassador emphasized that the driving idea behind this ongoing cooperation was "if our boat is rising, we had better take as many of our neighbors along as possible," recognizing that such an approach has the capability to enhance regional security, reduce migration issues, and increase the capacity for regional trade.

There appears to be a strong parallel between East Asia's regional growth of the past thirty years and the accompanying development of close ties between states. South Asia is now hoping to promote similar regional cooperation. The visit concluded with both sides expressing their wishes for continued mutual growth and prosperity. ■

Vikram K Doraiswami joined the Indian Foreign Service in 1992. Prior to joining the Indian Government, he worked for one year as a journalist. He earned his M.A. in History from the University of Delhi. He is fluent in Mandarin Chinese and previously served in a number of roles, including Consul General in South Africa and Ambassador of India to Uzbekistan, before he arrived in Seoul in 2015 to take charge as the Ambassador of India to South Korea.

Sook Jong Lee is the EAI President, and a professor of Public Administration at Sungkyunkwan University. Currently, Dr. Lee holds advisory positions in the South Korean government, including councils for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Unification, and the Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA). She also participates as member of the Council of Councils and many other transnational networks on research and policy studies. Dr. Lee received her B.A. from Yonsei University, and her M.A. and Ph.D. in sociology from Harvard University.