

*Interview questions for ambassador Menon

1. India and South Korea officially defines bilateral relationship as a "special strategic partnership" since 2015. How do you evaluate current relationship between India and South Korea?

A: The relationship is much stronger and deeper than it has ever been before. Today India and South Korea cooperate in all fields, from defence to economic cooperation and South Korea is one of India's most important partners. Good India-Korea relations can also contribute to the continued peaceful evolution of the Asia-Pacific region. Hence their strategic significance.

2. Korea elected the new president, Mr. Moon in May. What would you advise the new Korean administration to bolster cooperation between India and South Korea?

A: The potential is very great both in economic and in political relations. I would suggest that we do what we have so successfully done to deepen bilateral cooperation in the last few years, and that we should broaden our cooperation to joint action on the international stage, particularly on regional security issues in the Asia-Pacific, such as maritime security and cyber security. The Republic of Korea has a great deal to contribute to the broader region of which she is a part, including south-east Asia and southern Asia. India and Korea can work together for the security and prosperity of this larger region.

3. North Korea defies international sanction as continues its nuclear missile program. How do you see its impact on Asia Pacific security landscape in the next 5 years?

A: The North Korean quest for nuclear weapons and their delivery systems is a threat to regional security that all countries in the region must try to control. Recent experience shows that the efficacy of existing sanctions is limited and we will have to consider a range of political and other actions in coordination with sanctions if this threat is to be defused.

4. During the seminar with The Brookings Institution last year, you mentioned the development of North Korea's nuclear weapon capability as "the most dangerous flash point in the Asia-Pacific today". But you also mentioned that "you don't think that existing mechanisms actually have provided a way forward". Do you see any other options to curb North Korea's weapon program and improve peace and prosperity in this region?

A: I do not see a military solution to the problem posed by North Korea's nuclear weapons and delivery systems. Only a combination of political and economic and other incentives and disincentives, including sanctions and graded rewards for good behaviour will have a chance of success, in my opinion.

5. Many South Koreans are threatened by North Korea's aggression even under the U.S. nuclear umbrella. Some of them insist the redeployment of U.S. tactical nuclear weapons to South Korea. What do you think of such a policy option?

A: As I said before, I do not think that a purely military solution exists to the problem of North Korean behaviour. The presence of effective deterrence on the peninsula, whether extended deterrence involving the USA, or South Korea's own capabilities, are essential but not sufficient conditions to eliminate or control North Korea's nuclear weapons and their delivery systems.

6. After U.S. and Korea decided to deploy Anti-Missile Defense System (THAAD) to Korean peninsula, China showed unprecedented aggressive reactions toward South Korea through open threats of economic pressure. As one of the most influential China experts in India, please share your insights on China's motive and calculation behind this? How do you understand China's strategy?

A: As I see it, the THAAD system is a defensive system and not an offensive one. To the extent that it increases transparency between the parties concerned, and transparency about Chinese intentions and actions in particular, it would enhance deterrence, and should be seen as a factor of stability rather than as contributing to instability. One therefore assumes that there are reasons other than the stated ones behind China's strong objections to the system's deployment in Korea.

It is possible that the THAAD deployment came at a time when it was useful for China's political purposes — to signal her desire to have a decisive say and primacy on anything that might conceivably affect her security and freedom of action in her immediate periphery.

The THAAD controversy has also occurred just as China is working out her relations with the Trump administration. China has leveraged her potential actions on the North Korea nuclear issue to move the Trump administration away from its campaign rhetoric on China trade, currency, the South China sea and a host of other issues of concern to China.

For those of us who are China's neighbours, it remains a challenge to understand and deal with the China's increasing capabilities and ambitions in the region and the world. Chinese policy making remains opaque. For China, like India and Korea, the external world is now an integral and essential part of our ability to achieve our domestic transformation. We must therefore expect a China that is more assertive and engaged in the international system. This is an adjustment that will take some understanding and getting used to by others on China's periphery. The Asia-Pacific is a crowded strategic environment, with several established and many emerging powers. We, India and Korea, should therefore work together to ensure that the adjustment is smooth and peaceful.

7. China becomes increasingly assertive in Asia-Pacific and expands its economic and military power in the region. For example President Xi mentions "Asia for the Asians" . How do you see China's role in the Asian region and what does it mean to neighbouring countries like South Korea.

A: There have been great changes in the balance of power in the Asia-Pacific region in the last few decades, with the rise of several powers, China the foremost among them. This has been accentuated by US preoccupations with the Middle East and other parts of the world, and now by uncertainties introduced by the Trump administration. We are therefore in the midst of a fundamental rebalancing of security and other relationships in the region,

which seeks to accommodate rising Chinese power and the aspirations of other re-emerging countries, while maintaining the peace that has made the remarkable increase in Asia-Pacific prosperity possible. We cannot yet say that we have achieved a new equilibrium because the balance of power continues to change so rapidly. This is a new situation and phenomenon for all concerned — for China, the US, Japan, India, Korea and other countries on China's periphery, where her power is now a significant factor. We are learning by doing as we proceed. It is certainly in all our interests, including China's, that we succeed in this effort. But during the course of the readjustment, it is necessary that we avoid miscalculations and mishandling flash-points such as the North Korean nuclear issue. I certainly hope that we are successful.

8. "Thucydides Traps" is the notion that a rising power will come into conflict with an established power. Do you think we see it in the U.S.-China relationship especially in Asia?

A: I think there is a strong element of what Graham Allison calls a Thucydides trap in US-China relations today. But as he himself makes clear, conflict between a rising power and an established hegemon is likely but not inevitable. Today the stated US goal is to prevent the emergence of a peer competitor to the US anywhere in the world; China's unstated goal appears to be first regional and then global primacy. In this form, these two goals are irreconcilable. In the 16 previous cases of a Thucydides trap in the last 500 years, conflict was avoided only when one side or the other decided to amend and moderate their goal. All right thinking people must hope that China and the US show the wisdom to do so.

9. Your grandfather, served as a chairman of UNTCOK(United Nations Temporary Commission on Korea), made great contribution to Korean independence after World War II. He also showed his earnest wish for unified Korea at that time. But the relationship between two Korea is never worse before now. As a foreign affairs expert, please tell us what kind of effort in foreign policy is needed for South Korea to create an international atmosphere that is favourable to unification.

A: Thank you for remembering my grand-father, KPS Menon's role in UNTOK and Korean independence, which he often spoke about with pride to us in the family. It is good to remember that history today, when it appears that the situation for Korean reunification is very complex and unfavourable. Thinking back reminds us that there have been worse and more complex times in the past, and that we were able to move forward then, producing good outcomes. As for forward movement today, it seems to me that the primary movers in reunification must be the people of Korea themselves, on both sides of the 38th parallel. Great powers will always look at Korean reunification through the lenses of their own self interest, which is not always the same as that of the Korean people. But the rest of the world would be happy if the Korean people were to be reunified.

--