

Pakistan-South Korea Relations: Exploring New Avenues and Policy Options

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Abstract

Pakistan and South Korea have enjoyed long-standing relations, based on decades of bilateral cooperation across multiple areas. The relationship between the Islamic Republic of Pakistan and the Republic of Korea is marked by mutual trust, respect and support on important regional and international issues. Both states share similar historical background but a different present picture. Both states achieved independence in the 1940s, both agricultural-based, but economically poor, depending heavily on foreign aid and investment. However, South Korea has progressed significantly, transforming from an aid recipient to a donor. At the moment, South Korea is the 3rd-largest exporter in Asia and the 8th-largest exporter worldwide. Pakistan, on the other hand, progressed slowly, ranking 16th in Asia in exports and 67th globally. South Korea thus offers so much to learn from, in terms of economic development and industrial progress. Nonetheless, Pakistan, with its rich natural resources and youthful population, is attractive to foreign investors such as South Korea. There is so much untapped potential in Pakistan that the partners need to explore and invest in. Further, Pakistan can serve as a vital gateway for South Korea to the Middle East, Central Asia, and Africa. This article examines bilateral relations between Pakistan and South Korea, focusing on key areas of cooperation. The study further explores emerging avenues of cooperation between Pakistan and South Korea in sectors including energy, infrastructure, construction, telecom, agriculture and agribusiness, education, and labour and employment. The article further evaluates a range of policy options and concludes with recommendations to enhance cooperation between Pakistan and South Korea.

Keywords: Pakistan – South Korea Relations, Potential Avenues, Future Opportunities, Policy Options

Introduction

The official diplomatic relations between the Islamic Republic of Pakistan and the Republic of Korea, commonly known as South Korea, were established on November 7, 1983. Diplomatic relations at the consular level began in 1968; however, relations between the embassies of both states began in 1983 (Hussain, 2025; PRAC, n.d.). The diplomatic ties between the two states have grown gradually since then. The relationship between both nations grew in the best interests of their people at various official and non-official levels. Ties between South Korea and Pakistan began in the 1980s; nevertheless, Pakistan provided generous support to South Korea during the

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Korean War with North Korea (1950-53). Pakistan provided 10,000 tons of wheat, medicines, and other essential commodities, along with US\$ 378,000, to South Korea during the Korean War. This aid is considered the third-largest financial contribution during the war (Hussain, 2025).

In 2023, Pakistan and South Korea celebrated the 40th anniversary of their diplomatic relations. According to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) of Pakistan, the relationship between Pakistan and the Republic of Korea highlights a strong partnership in various fields (MOFA, 2023) and has demonstrated mutual respect and trust. Pakistan's relations with the Republic of Korea have grown substantially over the years across trade and investment, defence, education, cultural exchanges, and human resources development. Since establishing diplomatic ties in 1983, Pakistan-South Korea relations have evolved from basic economic exchanges into a stable, multifaceted partnership involving trade (exceeding \$1 billion), technology, and cultural cooperation. Masood et al (2025) state that an increase in the number of high-level visits, cultural exchanges and official engagements demonstrates the strength of the relationship between the two countries. In October 2023, Pakistan presented its culture through traditional clothes, accessories, henna, traditional music and national anthem at one of the Korea's largest multicultural festivals called Migrant [Arirang] Multicultural Festival (MAMF) (Masood, et al. 2025), with the theme of "Together to Gather: A Festival for Global Citizens," (Haps, 2024, Radio Pakistan, 2023). This multicultural festival aims to celebrate the cultures and traditions of migrants in South Korea and promote harmony, peace, and coexistence. The main aim of this research is to give a brief account of the relationship between the Islamic Republic of Pakistan and the Republic of Korea since the establishment of their official diplomatic ties in 1983. The research methodology and literature review will be followed by recommendations for policymakers and other stakeholders. The exploration of the untapped potential of Pakistan and South Korea will assist policymakers and investors in both countries in realising the benefits of each other's potential. Further, Pakistani students, researchers, and scholars who are aspirants for higher education or employment in South Korea, and vice versa, will guide them to gain insight into the opportunities these two countries offer.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative approach to examine the bilateral relations between Pakistan and South Korea. The study draws on secondary data from government documents, policy reports, research papers, trade statistics from the official websites of concerned departments, news reports, and publications of international organisations such as the World Bank and the IMF. Additionally, a policy analysis framework has been employed to evaluate potential avenues of cooperation and assess the appropriate policy options to further strengthen relations between Pakistan and South Korea.

Four Decades of Diplomatic Relations between Pakistan and South Korea

Diplomatic ties between Pakistan and South Korea have grown stronger over time since their official establishment in 1983. To celebrate four decades of relations between the two states, the "Korea Pakistan Cultural Gala" was held in October 2023, organised by the Korean Government to further strengthen these relations and cultural ties. The Korean government has been promoting investments in various sectors of Pakistan through such activities (Baig, 2024).

Trade and Investment between Pakistan and South Korea

Irfan Haider reports that Pakistan has been exporting cotton, vinegar, knitted and crocheted articles to Korea. Besides these items, Korea also imports salt, lime, cement, oil, oilseed grains and some

fruits from Pakistan (Irfan, 2020). Since trade policies in Pakistan have been amended from time to time to increase exports and decrease imports. But the import and export data for South Korea and Pakistan show a trade imbalance between the two countries. According to the Press Information Department (PID) of the Government of Pakistan, trade and investment between Pakistan and South Korea have increased over time, and trade between the two countries currently stands at US\$ 1.3 billion annually, although it is significantly in favour of South Korea (PID, 2025). Pakistan and South Korea most recently signed an agreement to strengthen their cooperation in the chemical sector. The delegates from both sides discussed the ways to increase trade volume through technology and manufacturing partnerships (PCMA, 2026). The step is seen as moving beyond the traditional sectors and exploring more mutually beneficial industrial growth prospects. PRAC (n.d.) reports that Pakistan and South Korea share similar historical background but a different present picture. Both countries emerged on the world map in the 1940s. Both were agricultural-based states but economically poor, depending heavily on foreign aid and assistance. South Korea, no doubt, progressed significantly, transforming the state into the 3rd-largest exporter in Asia and the 8th-largest exporter worldwide, and from an aid-receiving country to a Donor (PRAC, n.d., & Khan, 2015). The visionary leadership gave the Korean economy a boost that many countries dream of. The rise of US\$ 58 to above US\$ 36,000 in 2025 gave developing countries a very solid reason to follow the Korean imprints and implementation methods (Khan, 2015; CEIC, 2026). The table below shows the chronological relationships between Pakistan and South Korea since 1968.

Table 1: Pakistan's Historical Relations with Republic of Korea

Year	Activity
1968	Establishment of consular offices
1983	Consular Offices were elevated to embassies
1985	High-level visits from Pakistan to South Korea
2003	Signing of various Memorandum of Understanding (MoUs)
2005	Prime Minister visit to ROK - discussion on cooperation
2006	MOU on Employment Permit System (EPS)
2009	Lotte Chemicals purchased 75% shares of Pakistan PTA in Port Qasim
2010	Pakistan was included in KSP program
2011	EDCF financing pledged for Malakand Tunnel Project
2012	Pakistan - South Korea sign six agreements
2015	9th Round of Bilateral Political Consultations
2016	Agreed to push off formal negotiation on FTA
2017	A loan agreement to build Pakistan's IT Park by KEXIM
2018	10th Round of Bilateral Policy Consultations
2019	New EDCF framework
2020	South Korea's support to Pakistan in COVID19
2023	South Korea-Pakistan Business Forum
2024	Pakistan to ink economic partnership deal with South Korea
2025	Negotiations for Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) began

Source: PRAC (n.d.) and Ministry of Commerce, Government of Pakistan (2025)

The Economic Partnership Agreement signed between Pakistan and South Korea highlights efforts on both sides to enhance trade and investment across sectors such as goods and services, information technology, food, minerals, textiles, and logistics (Ministry of Commerce, 2025). The demand for Korean vehicles is further boosting economic ties between the two countries. The automotive sector is where famous South Korean companies, including Hyundai and Kia, have also launched their cars, which are very well received by Pakistani customers. Besides vehicles, Samsung, a popular mobile company, has a mobile assembly plant in Karachi that produces 3 million phones annually. Besides this, the Economic Development and Cooperation Fund (EDCF) is providing US\$1 billion loans with US\$350 million allocated for projects such as the establishment of IT Parks in the capital cities of Islamabad and Karachi and a technologically advanced children's hospital in Sukkur, one of the biggest cities of the province of Sindh. (PRAC, n.d.).

Cultural and Educational Exchanges through Soft Power and Public Diplomacy

Several countries these days are promoting their relationships with other states through soft diplomacy, including cultural exchanges, people-to-people contacts, and educational exchanges in areas such as the arts, languages, scholarships, and university partnerships. Pakistan and South Korea are exploring avenues of engagement beyond traditional economic frameworks by expanding cultural, people-to-people, and academic connections. The Policy Research and Advisory Council (PRAC) reports that, at the moment, 1,500 Pakistani students are pursuing higher education at various universities in South Korea. Besides the students, 10,000 Pakistani workers are working in different industries in South Korea. Further, the quota is set at 3800 workers to be employed in South Korea annually. On the other hand, 20 South Korean firms have invested in and established businesses in Pakistan, with over 800 Koreans living there (PRAC, n.d.).

Pakistan participated in the “K-Wave Festival Cultural Exchange Booth” organised by the Korean Culture and Information Services (KOCIS) in 2022. Pakistan exhibited its rich cuisine and culture to thousands of people attending the festival (Masood et al., 2024). In October 2024, a Korea-Pakistan Cultural Gala was organised to further strengthen the people-to-people contact. The participants enjoyed the folk music performed by artists from both sides, and four Korean films were also screened. The activity highlighted the importance of a strong partnership between South Korea and Pakistan across various fields, including economic, educational, and cultural cooperation (The Express Tribune, 2024). In October 2025, to further foster harmony between the people of both countries, the Embassy of the Republic of Korea hosted the festival titled “K-Wave Festa: Beauty, Beats and Beyond” in Islamabad, the Capital city of Pakistan. The K-Beauty Masterclass, K-Dance Workshop, and free Korean skincare, makeup, and cultural gifts were offered to the participants (Pakistan Today, 2025).

The Korean Wave, or Hallyu as it is called in Korean, is the term used for the spread of Korean culture through its products, such as Korean music (K-Pop), dramas, and Korean dance. It has been very impactful, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. Like other Asian countries, Pakistan was also affected by the Hallyu or K-Wave. Pakistan offers a great opportunity for South Korean investment in the entertainment field, such as games, content creation, films, music, food, fashion, and television, as it is very popular amongst Pakistani youth (Bhatti et al., 2022; Indraswari, 2022). South Korea's investment in Pakistan is contributing greatly to Pakistan's economic growth. Investment in infrastructure, technology, and manufacturing has played a greater role in modernising these sectors. Ancho et al. (2021) state that it is quite evident in South Korea's

approach of reaching out to its neighbours through various exchanges. South Korea has been working on ways to utilise education towards regional peace and prosperity. Education plays a vital role in people's mobility, cultural exchange, and in turning individuals into productive professionals (Ancho et al., 2021).

Besides cooperation in economic development and modernisation, both countries have developed strong people-to-people partnerships through cultural and educational exchanges. Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad, while celebrating forty years of friendship between Pakistan and South Korea, stated if South Korea under its “New Southern Policy” and Pakistan with its “Engage East” Strategy work together towards involving other countries, the partnership between the two countries can become even more significant and beneficial for not only the two states but the Asia Pacific region as a whole (ISSI, 2023).

The cultural and educational exchange partnership between the Republic of Korea and Pakistan is also highlighted by the Consortium for Asia-Pacific and Eurasian Studies (CAPES) in Islamabad. The President of CAPES, Dr. Khuram Iqbal, indicated towards developing a “Pakistan-Korea Knowledge Corridor”. He stated that around 1600 Pakistani students are attending Korean universities, and more students and researchers are interested in getting higher education from the Asia Pacific region, including South Korea (APP, 2026). To overcome the language barrier and make students aware of South Korean culture, Korean Language and Culture Centres have been established in various cities of Pakistan. Besides, language centres at Tongwon University, South Korea, are interested in establishing their campus in Lahore, the capital city of the province of Punjab, as a part of this knowledge corridor (APP, 2026).

Potential Avenues of Cooperation for South Korea in Pakistan

South Korea sees Pakistan as a long-term partner for investment, cooperation and people-to-people exchanges. Pakistan, with its rich natural resources and youthful population, is attractive to foreign investors such as South Korea. There is so much untapped potential in Pakistan that the partners need to explore and invest in. Further, Pakistan can serve as a vital gateway for South Korea to the Middle East, Central Asia, and Africa (Joo-won, 2025). The coastline of Pakistan, which covers over 1000 kilometres in Sindh and Balochistan, offers a significant maritime route for trade and energy. Jamal Shahid reports in Dawn (2022) that South Korea can benefit from the Pakistani young population in its technology companies.

Tourism is another area in which both Pakistan and Korea can increase their bilateral cooperation. South Korea recognises Pakistan as an attractive destination for South Korean travellers. The Gandhara Civilisation can help boost cultural relationships between the two states (Shahid, 2022). The Buddhist sites in Pakistan can attract a good number of South Korean tourists. There are tremendous opportunities for the development of religious tourism between Pakistan and Korea (IPRI, 2017).

Pakistan and South Korea can benefit from their mutual relationship, as their friendship is growing rapidly and widely over time, and Pakistan can prove to be another land of opportunity for the Republic of Korea (Khan, 2015). Pakistan is richly endowed with natural resources, including oil, gas, coal, gold, copper, salt, and iron ore. With the second-largest copper reserves and the second-largest coal deposits in the world (Shah, 2018), Pakistan can attract huge amounts of investments from Korean investors.

At the official launch of the Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) between Pakistan and South Korea, the Korean minister for trade, Inkyo Cheong, highlighted Pakistan's importance and emphasised that trade, investment, and collaboration between the two countries can be enhanced

for the benefit of both. He further stated that Pakistan could serve as a strategic manufacturing hub to reach new markets in East Africa and Central Asia. To materialise such plans, South Korea is planning to shift its production base from its Northeast Asian neighbours to Pakistan under the Economic Partnership Agreement between the two states (PID, 2025; Ministry of Commerce, 2025).

Potential Avenues of Cooperation for Pakistan in South Korea

South Korea achieved exceptional economic and industrial progress under dedicated leadership. Pakistan can learn from South Korea's shift from low-tech industries to advanced sectors. Industrialisation requires considerable effort not only from industries but also from the government. The implementation cannot sustain without regular planning and monitoring (Romana & Leonardo, 2014). Pakistan can learn from South Korea about how to sustain the initiatives taken. The economic planning and implementation strategies can be replicated. In the quest for technological advancements, South Korea is viewed as a valuable ally to Pakistan.

Pakistan has long faced an energy crisis, with severe power shortages across the country. The industrial, agricultural and even residential sectors of the country face hours of load shedding. Despite having sufficient hydropower potential, only 16% of 64,000 MW has been tapped. Pakistan and South Korea are already working together in the solar sector, but Pakistan can gain more solutions for its energy deficits with increased involvement of Korean firms in solar, wind and hydroelectric systems (Joo-won, 2025).

Conclusion and Recommendations

The sectors where Pakistan can invest in Korea are as follows, but not limited to, the energy / power sector, infrastructure and construction sector, electronics and telecom sector, agriculture and agri-business sector, cultural and education sector, automotive manufacturing sector, and labour and employment sector. Moreover, with improved economic ties, Pakistan can secure South Korea's support. The following are a few of the recommendations for policymakers and other stakeholders who are working day and night to promote bilateral relations between the Islamic Republic of Pakistan and the Republic of Korea:

Ø Trade fairs, exhibitions, delegations, and training should be organised across the country to establish linkages with investors and business communities on both sides, as it is observed that trade fairs and exhibitions are confined to major cities only.

- Pakistan's diplomatic missions in South Korea need to be more interactive with business communities to explore trade potential and invite the Korean business community to invest in Pakistan. Besides, frequent high-level visits should be paid to strengthen cooperation.
- Ø The Special Investment Facilitation Council (SIFC), a Government of Pakistan initiative, has been providing the highest level of facilitation to foreign investors. Through this one-window initiative, international partners observe an open and cooperative economic environment in Pakistan.
- There is rich potential for tourism in Pakistan. To exploit the potential of religious tourism in both countries, joint cultural events can be organised in cooperation with Buddhist Organisations of Korea. Publicity of tourist and religious sites in Pakistan through a documentary will further promote Pakistan as a destination for religious tourism; and
- People-to-people contacts play an instrumental role in strengthening relations between two states. Many Pakistanis live in Korea. Apart from this, many Pakistani students have gone to South Korea for studies. There is a need to increase the number of scholarships for Pakistani

students, as they can build a positive image of both states worldwide. Both countries should relax their visa procedures to encourage the two-way flow of people. Students, professionals and artistes should visit the region to enhance person-to-person engagements.

Pakistan views South Korea as a valuable ally and can learn from South Korea to advance technology, while South Korea recognises Pakistan as a strategic partner. Pakistan and South Korea can benefit from their growing, broadening relationship, and Pakistan can prove to be another land of opportunity for the Republic of Korea.

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