Soft Power on the Field: How the 2026 MOU Could Rewrite the Rules of India-South Korea Engagement

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During the recent state visit of the President of the Republic of Korea (ROK), Lee Jae Myung, to India, both countries took major steps to advance and deepen cooperation in several fields and take the special strategic partnership between the two countries forward. While it was pledged to take India-ROK trade to USD 50 billion by 2030, along with other important announcements and the signing of various MOUs, one particular MOU caught observers' attention.

The MOU on cooperation in sports between India and the ROK has piqued the interest of sports enthusiasts and practitioners. This MOU covers and facilitates engagements between the sports sectors of the two countries, including exchanges of personnel and experts. Apart from deepening cooperation between the sports authorities and other sports bodies of India and South

Korea, the MOU also calls for knowledge and program exchange in talent development, coaching, and sports science.

The MOU has the potential to advance people-to-people relations and enhance the cultural connection between the two sides, thereby mutually benefiting by helping increase the soft power of both.

However, this raises an important question. Given the complementary yet contrasting sporting landscapes of India and South Korea, can this MOU move beyond promises and deliver tangible outcomes?

History of Sports Cooperation between India and South Korea

In a way, the 2026 MOU builds on arguably what has been a successful attempt at sports cooperation between the two countries. In November 2018, the Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports of the Government of India and the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism of the Republic of Korea signed an MOU on sports cooperation. This was the first time that such a step had been taken since full diplomatic relations were established between India and South Korea in 1973.

On the face of it, a gap of 45 years seems far too long, but it is perhaps understandable, since South Korea did not emerge as a sporting power until after the 1988 Seoul Olympics. India also did not regularly start winning medals at international competitions for another 20 years. Moreover, the importance of sports as a tool for people-to-people relations has only recently been recognized.

The 2018 MOU categorically stated that the two sides recognized the importance of sports cooperation in fostering a friendly relationship and expressed a desire to develop such cooperation between India and the ROK. It called for the exchange of coaches and scientific materials, joint training for athletes and officials, and participation in symposia, seminars, and events organized by either side. Also, it was

highlighted that sports authorities, bodies, and federations from both sides will cooperate on a range of issues, which include elite sports, sports for the disabled, sports for all, sports science, anti-doping, Taekwondo, Kabaddi, and other sporting events.

A significant takeaway from the 2018 MOU was that it set up an institutional channel for sports cooperation between the two countries. The MOU showed that both countries were interested in and willing to learn from each other's sports ecosystems and to replicate best practices. It was especially pertinent given that South Korea is the most successful Olympic nation in Taekwondo by a country mile. Since it was introduced as a medal sport at the Sydney Olympics in 2000, South Koreans have won 25 medals in the competition, almost double that of second-placed China, which has won 13.

The most significant outcome of the 2018 MOU came in February 2023, when the All India Taekwondo Championship was co-organized by the Sports Authority of India with the Korean Cultural Center, India, and the Korean National Sport University to celebrate the 50th anniversary of India-South Korea diplomatic relations. Alongside the tournament, an MOU was signed between Miranda House, the University of Delhi, and the Korean National Sport University, under which professionals from the latter were to teach Taekwondo theory and practice to students at Miranda House. It was announced that after the tournament concluded, 12 gold medalists would have the opportunity to train and learn in South Korea for three weeks at the Korean National Sport University.

Apart from Taekwondo, archery was also one of the sports that saw progress. Perhaps it was a no-brainer, since, like Taekwondo, the ROK is the most successful nation at the Olympics in archery, with a total haul of 50 medals. In May 2024, the renowned Korean archery coach Kim Hyung Tak came to India and conducted a seminar for Indian archery coaches at

the National Center of Excellence of the Sports Authority of India in Sonipat, where he also praised the Indian archery setup. Ahead of the 2025 World Championships, Indian archers such as Atanu Das and Deepika Kumari had the opportunity to train in the ROK. Thus, these exchanges provided a perfect platform to build on and progress to a new MOU.

Importance of the 2026 MOU

The official media release of the Ministry of External Affairs of the Government of India has listed the MOU on sports cooperation under the head 'amplifying the soft power quotient.' It shows intent and a realization on both sides that, in today's world, which remains in flux in one way or another, sport is an important instrument of soft power. The latter becomes especially important for middle powers such as India and the ROK.

On the face of it, the new MOU appears more geared towards coaching methodologies and sports science, apart from the cooperation among the sports bodies and the exchange of personnel. It is a welcome development since, in elite sports, the margins have narrowed over time due to advancements in recovery techniques and in-game body management.

So, learning from the ROK in archery and taekwondo, among other sports, and from India in wrestling and Kabaddi (two sports where India has high standards of training facilities and a track record of winning), with a special focus on sports science and coaching methodologies, is going to be an excellent opportunity for sportspersons in both countries. In the longer term, both sides could also explore convergences between Indian wrestling and *Ssireum*, the traditional Korean wrestling.

Potential Arenas of Sports Cooperation

A case here also needs to be put forward for increasing football cooperation between India and the ROK. India is a big

and growing market for football, but has a national team and domestic system that punches well below its potential. On the other hand, South Korea is a football powerhouse in Asia, as it holds the record for the most FIFA World Cup appearances by any Asian team, with 12. According to the latest FIFA rankings, their men's team is ranked 25th, and their women's team is ranked 19th. Their academy system is also very well developed, and Indian academies can learn from it to further develop talented Indian youth.

The MOU's emphasis on coaching methodologies and sports science can be especially important if both countries pursue cooperation in football. In women's football, cooperation with the ROK holds even greater potential, as the Koreans have a mature women's football ecosystem, with success in age-group FIFA tournaments and a high-performing senior team in Asia. Here is a strong case for institutionalized partnerships between football governing bodies of both countries, and at the club level for both women and men.

Like football, cricket might be another arena where India could provide the ROK what the latter might give it in football. In East Asia, India has already begun cricket cooperation with Japan. South Korea should be the next logical step. India has state-of-the-art cricket training systems, world-class infrastructure, and elite players and coaches who could impart skills to their Korean counterparts. India could also help Korean cricket with financial grants, given the former's massive revenue streams. ROK cricket is still in its nascent stages, and it could be nurtured with the help of a giant like India, and then could follow the trajectory of recent developers like Italy and Nepal. It will help in enhancing people-to-people connections and cultural exchanges, and spread the game of cricket in its mission to truly make it global.

Challenges and Recommendations

While sports cooperation between the two sides holds huge potential, they should also be mindful that COVID-related cost cuts in global sport are still lingering. These will need to be managed effectively in the long term for a fruitful sports partnership. Also, enabling mechanisms will need to be strengthened over time to prevent bureaucratic hurdles from stifling progress. For the 2018 MOU, visible progress was not seen until 2023 and public data on sports cooperation between the two sides in general remains scant.

Another missing area of cooperation in the 2026 MOU is any agreement on cooperation in the sports industry, especially manufacturing. While India specializes in the manufacture of mainstream sports goods at scale, South Korea’s strength lies in sports manufacturing allied with high-end technology. Both countries can complement each other here and should strongly consider expanding their sports cooperation in the industrial domain.

Looking Ahead

While both countries have signaled their intent, it is now incumbent on them to translate that intent into even more valuable and tangible outcomes than an iteration of the 2018 MOU. If they succeed in doing so in the next decade (when India may well be hosting the Olympics in Ahmedabad), South and East Asia will have genuine sporting superpowers competing for the biggest honors of sport.