



UAE-South Korea Relations Amid and After Iran War: From Economic Cooperation to Strategic Partnership

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Summary

- UAE-South Korea relations have acquired renewed strategic significance in recent years. Bilateral cooperation has steadily expanded beyond its traditional foundations in infrastructure, energy, and civil nuclear cooperation to encompass defence, advanced technologies, and investment.
- The 2026 Iran war has created a fresh impetus for UAE-South Korea relations. While bilateral ties have traditionally focused on energy, trade, infrastructure, nuclear cooperation, and defence procurement, the evolving regional security environment now provides an opportunity to transform the relationship into a broader strategic partnership.
- This Insight highlights how the UAE is increasingly shaping its foreign policy around two complementary priorities: advancing economic diversification and strengthening national resilience.
- It also argues that rather than replacing the UAE's traditional security partners, particularly the United States and Europe, South Korea should be regarded as a trusted and complementary partner that enhances the UAE's strategic resilience through advanced technology, industrial capability, and political reliability.
- During the 2026 Iranian attacks against the UAE, South Korea's provision of air and missile defence assets, including advanced systems such as the KM-SAM II (also known as Cheongung-II), underscored the strategic value of this partnership.
- The Insight proposes four mutually reinforcing pillars for future UAE-South Korea cooperation:
 1. furthering economic cooperation, including energy, trade, infrastructure, and nuclear cooperation;
 2. strengthening defence cooperation, particularly in air and missile defence;
 3. expanding collaboration in advanced technologies, including artificial intelligence (AI), cybersecurity, digital infrastructure, and health technology; and
 4. developing trilateral cooperation with the Global South, particularly Sub-Saharan Africa, by combining Emirati investment and diplomacy with Korean technology to support digital government, smart infrastructure, healthcare, logistics, and AI capacity building.
- The Insight also identifies several strategic risks that require careful management. These include ensuring interoperability between Korean and existing defence systems, avoiding procurement fragmentation, managing expectations regarding South Korea's security role, addressing regulatory and data governance challenges in health and AI cooperation, and ensuring that trilateral projects in Africa remain demand-driven and aligned with African national priorities.

The Issue

The 2026 Iran war gave renewed strategic urgency to the already expanding UAE–South Korea Special Strategic Partnership. In previous years, bilateral ties were primarily centred on economic cooperation, energy, infrastructure development, technology, and defence procurement.¹ However, emerging regional security challenges, the growing importance of artificial intelligence, and the UAE’s expansion in Sub-Saharan Africa have created new opportunities to broaden this relationship within a more comprehensive strategic framework.²

The UAE’s foreign policy focuses on expanding its defence partnerships, demonstrating political and military flexibility without neglecting existing partners. South Korea is not intended to replace the UAE’s traditional security partners—particularly the United States and Europe—but rather to complement them in areas where advanced technology, defence capabilities, industrial capacity, and political flexibility are increasingly important.³ South Korea’s advanced technologies, particularly in air and defence systems, can help the UAE strengthen its national resilience while reducing excessive dependence on a limited number of suppliers.⁴ At the same time, South Korea’s strengths in digital infrastructure, smart technologies, and industrial innovation closely align with the UAE’s economic diversification and domestic transformation agenda.

As both countries seek to navigate a more uncertain geopolitical environment, the UAE-Korea partnership has the potential to evolve from a largely economic relationship into a multidimensional strategic partnership encompassing security, technology, innovation, and regional connectivity. UAE and South Korea could strengthen strategic cooperation in three mutually reinforcing domains: defence (particularly air and missile defence), advanced technologies such as artificial intelligence, and joint economic and development initiatives in Sub-Saharan Africa.

New Phase

After withstanding the severe challenges of the 2026 Iran war, the UAE increasingly shaped its foreign policy around two complementary priorities: strengthening national resilience and advancing economic diversification. The regional environment surrounding the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries remains highly challenging and volatile, specifically with recent tensions involving Iran, the United States, and Israel continuing to reshape regional perceptions of deterrence, energy security, maritime routes, and the protection of critical infrastructure.

For the UAE, traditional military protection is no longer the sole pillar of national security. The experience of the Iran war reinforced the importance of a comprehensive resilience strategy that integrates air and missile defence, cybersecurity, critical energy infrastructure, food security, digital systems, health resilience, supply chain security, and technological sovereignty.

Since the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1980, UAE-South Korea ties have evolved into a broad and increasingly substantive Special Strategic Partnership (See Figure 1). Bilateral cooperation has steadily expanded beyond its traditional foundations in infrastructure, energy, and civil nuclear cooperation to encompass defence, advanced technologies, and investment.

More importantly, the nature of the partnership is evolving. South Korea is no longer viewed merely as a supplier, contractor, or economic partner; it is increasingly regarded as a technologically advanced, politically reliable, and strategically valuable partner capable of supporting the UAE’s long-term vision for security, economic diversification, and technological transformation. On February 26, 2026, just two days before the Iran war, the UAE and South Korea signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) to expand defence cooperation, with potential agreements worth more than US\$35 billion across areas including air defence, air force capabilities, and naval cooperation.⁵

Figure 1. Evolution of UAE-South Korea Relations (1980-2026)

YEAR	MILESTONE	STRATEGIC SIGNIFICANCE
1980	Establishment of diplomatic relations	Beginning of official relations.
2009	Barakah Nuclear Power Plant contract awarded to Korean consortium	Landmark project that elevated bilateral relations beyond trade into long-term strategic cooperation.
2011	Deployment of the Korean Akh Unit to the UAE	First overseas deployment of the Korean military; symbolized growing defence cooperation and mutual trust.
2018	Establishment of the Special Strategic Partnership	Bilateral relations formally upgraded to the highest strategic level.
2023	President Yoon Suk Yeol's state visit to the UAE	UAE pledged US\$30 billion in investments in Korea; launched the Comprehensive Strategic Energy Partnership (CSEP) and Strategic Partnership on Industry and Advanced Technology (SPIAT); official statement described the two countries as "true friends".
2024	President Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed's state visit to Korea	Signed the UAE-Korea CEPA and expanded cooperation in AI, cybersecurity, defence technology, nuclear energy, healthcare, infrastructure, and Africa.
2025	President Lee Jae Myung's state visit to the UAE	Joint Declaration pledged to elevate the Special Strategic Partnership to a "permanent and irreversible level" and described Korea as a "trusted and forward-looking partner".
2026	Expansion of defence cooperation	Signed a defence cooperation MoU reportedly worth more than US\$35 billion, covering air and missile defence, air force, navy, and defence-industry cooperation.

Source: Authors' compilation based on: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the United Arab Emirates, "Joint Declaration between the Republic of Korea and the United Arab Emirates on the Occasion of the State Visit to the United Arab Emirates by H.E. Lee Jae Myung, President of the Republic of Korea," November 18, 2025, <https://www.mofa.gov.ae/en/mediahub/news/2025/11/18/18-11-2025-uae-korea>; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Korea, "Joint Statement between the Republic of Korea and the United Arab Emirates," May 29, 2024, https://www.mofa.go.kr/eng/brd/m_5674/view.do?seq=321014; Reuters, "South Korea, UAE Sign MoU on US\$35 Billion Defence Cooperation, Envoy Says," February 26, 2026, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/south-korea-uae-sign-mou-35-billion-defence-cooperation-envoy-says-2026-02-26/>.

More recently, the UAE's description of South Korea as a "trusted partner" and "true friend" reflects the depth and maturity of the bilateral relationship and the growing trust between the two countries.⁶ The partnership has extended beyond commercial transactions and is increasingly built on mutual trust, reliability, rapid responsiveness, political confidence, and the ability to cooperate effectively on sensitive security and strategic issues.

During the recent Iranian attacks against the UAE, South Korea's provision of air and missile defence assets, including advanced systems such as the KM-SAM II (also known as Cheongung-II) (a reported 96% interception rate against the Iranian missiles fired at the UAE⁷), underscored the strategic value of this partnership.⁸ For the UAE, the priority is not simply to acquire another defence system, but to build a more diversified, resilient, and multilayered defence architecture. While traditional partners such as the United States and European countries remain central to the UAE's security framework, Abu Dhabi is increasingly seeking to expand its security partners.

However, the UAE-South Korea partnership should not be viewed solely through the lens of defence. South Korea's comparative strengths in artificial intelligence, cybersecurity, digital infrastructure, healthcare technology, smart cities, logistics, and industrial innovation closely align with the UAE's long-term priorities of economic diversification, technological transformation, and national resilience. The UAE has invested heavily in artificial intelligence and

digital transformation, while also expanding its economic and diplomatic engagement in Sub-Saharan Africa.⁹ These converging priorities create a new opportunity to broaden bilateral cooperation beyond traditional sectors.

Alignment with UAE Strategic Vision

The UAE's foreign policy has been greatly influenced by the need to integrate national security, economic diversification, and global connectivity.¹⁰

In April 2026, the UAE exported approximately US\$1.4 billion worth of goods to South Korea while importing US\$228 million, generating a trade surplus of around US\$1.17 billion.¹¹ Compared with April 2025, UAE exports to South Korea increased by 50.5%, driven primarily by higher crude oil exports, while imports from South Korea declined by 54%.¹² Beyond merchandise trade, bilateral economic ties have been significantly strengthened by the UAE-South Korea Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA), signed in 2024 and entering into force on 1 May 2026. As South Korea's first Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement with a Gulf Cooperation Council and Middle East and North Africa (MENA) country, the UAE-Korea CEPA will progressively eliminate or reduce tariffs on approximately 91.2% of traded goods over a period of up to ten years.¹³ The agreement also covers trade in services, investment, digital trade, customs procedures and trade facilitation, government procurement, and intellectual property.¹⁴

In an era of heightened regional turbulence, partnerships built on trust, reliability, and policy alignment are becoming increasingly valuable. According to the UAE Ministry of Foreign Affairs, UAE-Korea relations have also been strengthened through dialogue channels and high-level meetings, including high-level consultations on nuclear cooperation, alongside a range of dialogue mechanisms and MoUs across various fields of cooperation.¹⁵

Four-Pillar Cooperation

The central policy question for the UAE, therefore, is no longer simply what can be purchased from South Korea, but rather how South Korea can help build the institutions, capabilities, and platforms that support the UAE's long-term strategic objectives. A strategic partnership integrates procurement with training, industrial cooperation, technology transfer, joint innovation, regulatory coordination, and overseas development initiatives. Viewed through this broader lens, the UAE-South Korea partnership has the potential not only to strengthen the UAE's national security but also to enhance its technological competitiveness and global influence.

Looking ahead, the UAE and South Korea could elevate their partnership through four mutually reinforcing pillars. First, deeper economic integration in energy, trade, infrastructure, and civil nuclear energy. Second, enhanced defence cooperation, particularly in air defence, missiles, and fighter jets. Third, expanded collaboration in advanced technologies, including artificial intelligence, cybersecurity, digital infrastructure, and health technology. Finally, trilateral partnerships with the Global South, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa, leveraging Emirati investment, logistics, and diplomacy alongside Korean technology and industrial capabilities to deliver high-impact projects in digital government, smart infrastructure, healthcare, logistics, and AI capacity building.

This approach reflects a broader evolution in the UAE's foreign policy—from reliance on traditional security partners toward more flexible, issue-based partnerships. It also aligns with the UAE's ambition to serve as a bridge connecting nations and regions. Strategically positioned at the crossroads of Asia, the Gulf, and Africa, the UAE is well placed to facilitate cross-regional cooperation through investment, logistics, diplomacy, and innovation. At the same time, South Korea is actively expanding its global partnerships and possesses the technological expertise and industrial capabilities to deliver high-impact, development-oriented projects abroad. Together, these complementary strengths provide a strong foundation for a more comprehensive and forward-looking strategic partnership.

Deeper Economic Integration under CEPA

Both sides could continue to consolidate and expand economic and trade cooperation, including in traditional areas such as energy, trade, and infrastructure. The UAE and South Korea have already achieved many landmark successes in these fields. Beyond the Barakah Nuclear Energy Plant, the Burj Khalifa offers another iconic example. In 2004, a consortium led by South Korea's Samsung C&T, together with Arabtec of the UAE and BESIX of Belgium, won a construction contract worth US\$875 million.¹⁶ The tower is not only a landmark of the UAE, but also one of the most representative achievements of UAE-South Korea engineering cooperation.

Moreover, South Korea’s economic ties with the UAE and the wider Gulf region have recently witnessed significant institutional progress, including the conclusion of Korea–GCC Free Trade Agreement (FTA) negotiations and the signing of a joint statement in late 2023 and the UAE–South Korea CEPA signed in 2024. Following the Burj Khalifa in 2004 and the Barakah Nuclear Energy Plant in 2009, these agreements mark another important milestone, demonstrating that UAE–South Korea cooperation has entered a new stage of institutionalized economic partnership.

At the same time, South Korea’s new Middle East strategy, the SHINE Initiative, announced by President Lee Jae Myung during his visit to the Middle East in November 2025, reflects Seoul’s long-term vision for engagement with the region (See Figure 2). Moving beyond traditional priorities such as energy and trade, the initiative places greater emphasis on innovation, education, and people-to-people exchanges. These priorities closely complement the UAE’s vision to “promote peace, strengthen resilience, and foster the values of tolerance and coexistence worldwide”.¹⁷ Building on this shared vision, the UAE and South Korea should broaden their partnership beyond economic cooperation by deepening collaboration in innovation, education, cultural exchanges, and sustainable development.

Figure 2. South Korea’s SHINE Initiative towards the Middle East

LETTER	MEANING	POLICY FOCUS
S	Stability	Promoting regional peace and security in the Middle East and on the Korean Peninsula.
H	Harmony	Building mutual trust through dialogue, diplomacy, and humanitarian cooperation.
I	Innovation	Expanding cooperation in artificial intelligence, hydrogen, digital technologies, advanced manufacturing, energy, and infrastructure.
N	Network	Strengthening institutional partnerships, economic connectivity, trade agreements, and public-private cooperation.
E	Education	Expanding scholarships, academic exchanges, research collaboration, and cultural diplomacy.

Source: Authors’ compilation based on Yonhap News Agency, “Lee Announces SHINE Initiative for Middle East in Cairo University Speech,” November 20, 2025, <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20251120010752315>.

The UAE–South Korea CEPA, which entered into force on 1 May 2026 shortly after the Iran war, represents a major milestone in bilateral economic relations, elevating the partnership from project-based cooperation to a more institutionalized framework for trade, investment, and economic integration.¹⁸ Together with the prospective Korea–GCC FTA, the CEPA provides an important institutional foundation for deepening UAE–South Korea strategic cooperation amid an increasingly uncertain geoeconomic environment.

Security Diversification: Opportunity with Limits

The latest regional escalation has underscored the importance of air and missile defence for the UAE and other GCC countries. Threats to civilian infrastructure, energy facilities, airports, ports, and population centres have made clear that air defence resilience is a national priority. The UAE already possesses a sophisticated security architecture, supported by long-standing cooperation with traditional partners such as the United States and European countries. Under sustained attack from missiles and drones in the war’s opening week, the UAE reportedly achieved an interception rate of around 93% against ballistic missiles and UAVs.¹⁹

South Korea’s KM–SAM II system presents an important opportunity in this context. Equipped with advanced air and missile defence capabilities, the system demonstrates Korea’s growing role as a serious and reliable defence technology provider. Emerging threats are increasingly flexible, layered, and multidimensional. For the UAE, deeper security cooperation with South Korea could strengthen national defence readiness while diversifying procurement sources. At the same time, it would send a political message that the UAE is capable of building reliable security partnerships beyond traditional suppliers while maintaining its existing alliances.

However, defence cooperation with South Korea should be guided by strategic discipline. The key question is not whether Korean systems are technologically advanced, but how effectively they can be integrated into the UAE's existing military architecture. Modern air and missile defence depends on interoperability. Radar sensors, interceptors, command-and-control networks, and information-sharing protocols must operate seamlessly. Without careful planning, additional systems may create new complications rather than strengthen resilience.

The UAE should therefore avoid unnecessary procurement fragmentation. Multiple suppliers can provide flexibility, but they can also generate maintenance challenges, training barriers, logistical inefficiencies, and operational confusion. For security cooperation to be valuable, it must remain coherent. Korean defence technology should be integrated into a well-organized national defence plan that reflects the UAE's strategic priorities.

Another important issue is strategic expectation. South Korea can be a strong technological partner, but it does not provide the kind of security umbrella offered by the United States. Nor does it have the same military presence or crisis management role in the Gulf. Therefore, cooperation with South Korea should not be viewed as a replacement for traditional security partners, but rather as a complementary pillar within a more diversified security strategy.

This distinction should guide the UAE's approach. The goal should be carefully planned diversification without disrupting existing strategic partnerships. Cooperation with South Korea should expand the UAE's options rather than complicate them. This requires technical assessment, clear communication with all relevant stakeholders, and a UAE-led integration framework to ensure that new systems serve national priorities rather than supplier-driven interests.

An initial step would be to establish a UAE-South Korea Defence Systems Integration Working Group. This group should include defence officials, technical experts, cybersecurity specialists, and procurement authorities. Its purpose should not be limited to discussing future purchases, but should also include assessing interoperability, maintenance, training, data sharing, command-and-control requirements, and lifecycle costs.

In this context, UAE-South Korea defence cooperation should be seen as part of a broader national resilience strategy. Air and missile defence cannot be separated from cybersecurity, energy security, port and airport protection, or emergency response. Modern threats are interconnected: a missile strike or cyberattack can produce economic, political, and social consequences. Defence cooperation with South Korea should therefore be linked to wider efforts to protect critical infrastructure and strengthen the UAE's overall resilience.

Artificial Intelligence, Cybersecurity, and Health Technology

The future UAE-South Korea partnership should extend well beyond defence cooperation. The most promising areas for long-term collaboration include artificial intelligence, cybersecurity, digital infrastructure, and health technology—all of which are central to the UAE's economic diversification, national resilience, and long-term competitiveness.

Artificial intelligence has become a key indicator of national capability, transforming public administration, logistics, healthcare, education, finance, energy management, and crisis response. The UAE has positioned itself as a global leader in AI through substantial investments in digital transformation, AI infrastructure, and international technology partnerships. South Korea, meanwhile, possesses world-class capabilities in semiconductors, robotics, smart manufacturing, electronics, and industrial innovation. These complementary strengths provide a solid foundation for a deeper technology partnership.

Rather than focusing solely on research, bilateral cooperation should prioritize practical, high-impact applications. Potential areas include AI-enabled airport security, smart port management, energy grid monitoring, predictive infrastructure maintenance, emergency medical response, public health systems, and AI-driven cybersecurity. These applications are not only commercially attractive but also strategically important, as they strengthen the critical infrastructure on which economic activity and national security depend.

Cybersecurity should become another pillar of the bilateral relationship. As the UAE becomes increasingly digitized, its exposure to cyber threats continues to grow. Ports, airports, energy facilities, financial institutions, hospitals, and government platforms are all potential targets, a vulnerability highlighted during the recent Iranian attacks on the UAE. South Korea's extensive experience in digital infrastructure and cyber resilience can help strengthen the UAE's defensive capabilities. Cooperation should therefore include joint cyber exercises, threat intelligence sharing,

professional training, cybersecurity certification, and the joint development of AI-enabled tools for protecting critical infrastructure.

Health technology offers another promising avenue for cooperation. The UAE has invested heavily in medical infrastructure and aims to become a regional hub for advanced healthcare services. South Korea complements these ambitions with its advanced healthcare system, internationally recognized hospitals, medical technology companies, and strong digital health capabilities. Bilateral cooperation could include partnerships between hospitals, specialist exchange programs, telemedicine, medical education and training, digital health platforms, and the application of AI in healthcare delivery.

To ensure the long-term sustainability of this cooperation, both countries should also strengthen their regulatory coordination. Deploying Korean medical professionals and health technologies in the UAE requires clear frameworks governing licensing, accreditation, professional liability, patient safety, health data protection, and compliance with UAE regulations, while also addressing relevant Korean regulatory requirements for overseas medical services. Establishing a dedicated UAE-South Korea health technology cooperation framework would facilitate hospital partnerships, temporary medical missions, telemedicine, AI-enabled healthcare solutions, medical training, and secure health data governance, thereby creating an enabling environment for deeper bilateral collaboration.

Trilateral Cooperation in Africa

One promising long-term opportunity for the UAE-South Korea partnership lies in developing a structured trilateral cooperation framework with the Global South, particularly Sub-Saharan Africa.²⁰ The UAE has emerged as the fourth-largest global investor in Africa, with foreign direct investment (FDI) stock of approximately US\$60 billion as of 2023.²¹ In 2023, it was also Africa's largest source of investment capital, committing approximately US\$44 billion—nearly matching the combined capital investments of the second- and third-largest investors, the United Kingdom and China.²²

Such a model would combine the UAE's strengths in investment, logistics, diplomacy, and expanding political engagement with South Korea's technological capabilities, industrial expertise, and successful development experience. Partner countries, in turn, would contribute local priorities, market knowledge, human capital, institutional ownership, and political legitimacy. If properly designed, this complementary framework could support high-impact projects in digital government, smart infrastructure, ports and logistics, health systems, cybersecurity, and AI capacity building.

Sub-Saharan Africa should serve as the initial focus of this framework. To maximize effectiveness, trilateral cooperation should be demand-driven, locally owned, and aligned with the national development priorities of partner countries. Rather than launching a broad and loosely defined initiative, the UAE and South Korea should begin with a limited number of pilot projects in countries that demonstrate strong political commitment, digital readiness, and implementation capacity. Kenya, Rwanda, and Ethiopia provide particularly promising starting points given their ambitious digital transformation agendas and experience working with international partners. Initial projects could focus on digital government, AI capacity building, smart infrastructure, public health platforms, and cybersecurity for critical government systems.

Following successful pilot implementation, the partnership could gradually expand to strategically important countries such as South Africa and Nigeria, while also exploring opportunities in other developing regions where the comparative advantages of the UAE and South Korea can generate meaningful development outcomes. A phased approach would enable both countries to refine the cooperation model, strengthen institutional coordination, and manage political, regulatory, and implementation risks before broader expansion.

The sectors selected for trilateral cooperation should capitalize on the complementary strengths of both partners. The UAE can contribute financial resources, logistics networks, diplomatic engagement, and project implementation capacity, while South Korea offers advanced technologies, industrial know-how, digital government expertise, and health technology. Together, these capabilities can help partner countries accelerate digital transformation, strengthen critical infrastructure, improve healthcare systems, and develop local technological and human capacities.

The UAE's growing commitment to supporting AI development in Africa provides a timely policy framework for launching this initiative.²³

However, successful trilateral cooperation will require strong institutional coordination. Experience demonstrates that trilateral partnerships often fail because responsibilities are poorly defined and implementation mechanisms remain weak. The UAE and South Korea should therefore establish a formal UAE-South Korea Trilateral Cooperation Mechanism responsible for identifying priority partner countries, jointly selecting projects with host governments, mobilizing financing, assigning institutional responsibilities, monitoring implementation, and evaluating outcomes. Such a mechanism would transform bilateral cooperation into a broader platform for sustainable development, positioning the UAE and South Korea not only as strategic partners with one another, but also as joint providers of development solutions across the Global South.

Strategic Risks and Policy Constraints

The UAE-South Korea partnership offers significant strategic potential, but several risks and policy constraints must be addressed to ensure its long-term success.

First, defence integration requires careful technical planning. Incorporating Korean defence systems into the UAE's existing military architecture will require seamless interoperability, including compatible command-and-control systems, data-sharing protocols, training, maintenance, and logistics. Without effective integration, additional capabilities could create operational complexity rather than strengthen national resilience.

Second, procurement fragmentation poses a long-term challenge. While diversifying defence suppliers can enhance strategic flexibility, it can also increase lifecycle costs and create difficulties in maintenance, spare parts, software updates, and personnel training. Procurement decisions should therefore be guided by comprehensive lifecycle assessments and long-term operational requirements.

Third, strategic expectations should remain realistic. Although South Korea can become an important defence technology partner, it does not provide the comprehensive security umbrella or military presence in the Gulf offered by the United States. Cooperation with South Korea should therefore complement—not replace—the UAE's existing security partnerships.

Fourth, regulatory complexity must be addressed in health technology cooperation. Expanding collaboration in healthcare will require clear frameworks governing licensing, accreditation, professional liability, patient safety, insurance arrangements, health data protection, and regulatory compliance in both countries.

Fifth, data governance will become increasingly important as cooperation expands in artificial intelligence, cybersecurity, and digital health. The two countries should establish clear standards for data ownership, cross-border data flows, cybersecurity, privacy protection, and the responsible use of AI.

Sixth, trilateral cooperation with developing countries, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa, must remain demand-driven and locally owned. Partner countries should play a central role in defining development priorities, selecting projects, implementing programmes, and evaluating outcomes to ensure local ownership and long-term sustainability.

Finally, both sides should avoid strategic overexpansion. Rather than launching numerous initiatives simultaneously, the UAE and South Korea should adopt a phased approach by implementing a limited number of well-designed pilot projects before expanding cooperation geographically or into additional sectors. Demonstrating success on a smaller scale will strengthen credibility, improve implementation, and provide valuable lessons for future collaboration.

Conclusion

The UAE-South Korea relationship has evolved beyond a partnership centred on trade, energy, and defence procurement. It now has the potential to become a multidimensional strategic partnership that integrates security, advanced technology, health resilience, and trilateral development cooperation. This evolution reflects the broader direction of the UAE's foreign policy—one that is pragmatic, flexible, diversified, and increasingly oriented toward building issue-based partnerships.

Realizing this potential will require strong institutions and clear strategic priorities. Defence cooperation must be fully integrated into the UAE's existing security architecture, while collaboration in health technology, artificial intelligence, cybersecurity, and digital infrastructure should be supported by robust regulatory and governance frameworks. Trilateral cooperation with developing countries, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa, should remain demand-driven, locally owned, and aligned with national development priorities. Rather than pursuing an overly ambitious agenda, both sides should prioritize a limited number of high-impact pilot projects capable of demonstrating tangible results.

Ultimately, the success of the UAE-South Korea partnership should not be measured by the number of agreements signed or projects announced, but by its contribution to the UAE's long-term strategic capacity and resilience. The opportunity extends far beyond the acquisition of advanced technologies or the implementation of isolated initiatives. It lies in building an institutionalized model of cooperation that reflects the UAE's evolving foreign policy vision—one that is globally connected, technologically advanced, economically resilient, and strategically flexible. In this sense, the UAE-South Korea partnership has the potential to evolve from a relationship between trusted partners into one between strategic enablers, jointly contributing to regional stability, technological innovation, and sustainable development across the Global South.

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