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By Ben McGrath
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South Korea extends military intelligence sharing agreement with Japan

Yesterday, only hours before the Japan-South Korea General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) was due to lapse at midnight, Seoul reversed course to extend the arrangement with Tokyo. The purpose of the agreement is to more closely tie together Washington's two principal allies in Northeast Asia in preparation for war with China and North Korea.

South Korea claims its decision was "conditional." Kim Yu-geun, deputy director of President Moon Jae-in's national security office, told a press briefing, "Our government has decided to suspend the notice of termination given on August 23 provided it can terminate GSOMIA at any time." The Japanese government of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe had expressed its understanding, he said.

Seoul has also withdrawn a World Trade Organization complaint against Tokyo related to export controls imposed in July on chemicals necessary in South Korea's manufacturing of high-tech goods. These export curbs had been the stated reason for allowing GSOMIA to expire. An anonymous presidential official told the media that Seoul would pursue a "two-track" approach with Japan, separating historical disputes from national security issues, the same approach Moon previously claimed he would follow.



Prime Minister Shinzo Abe of Japan, President Moon Jae-in of South Korea and U.S. Vice President Mike Pence meet in Pyeongchang, South Korea, site of the 2018 Winter Games. (Photo by S. Herman)

Tokyo, citing “national security,” imposed the export restrictions as retaliation for an October 2018 South Korean Supreme Court ruling ordering Nippon Steel and Sumitomo Metal Corporation to pay compensation to four victims of forced labor during Japan’s colonial subjugation of Korea from 1910 to 1945.

In response to Seoul’s threat to abandon GSOMIA, Washington exerted a great deal of pressure to maintain the deal, including through a phone call late last Thursday night between South Korean Foreign Minister Kang Kyung-wha and US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo.

Kang had told the National Assembly earlier that day that the deal would expire. By Friday, Kang had changed her tune, saying, “I believe the groundwork is laid for Japan to withdraw its export curbs, which is what we wanted, and we will work to achieve that goal.” Kang was in Japan for a meeting of G20 foreign ministers on Saturday and was expected to meet her Japanese counterpart, Toshimitsu Motegi.

The US also dispatched General Mark Milley, the chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, and Defense Secretary Mark Esper to the region last week. The latter told his South Korean counterpart Jeong Gyeong-du last Friday, “The only ones who benefit from the expiration of GSOMIA and continued friction between Seoul and Tokyo are Pyongyang and Beijing.”

Abe welcomed Seoul's reversal stating, "It's extremely important for Japan and South Korea, as well as the United States, to cooperate and coordinate to cope with North Korea... South Korea is believed to have made its decision from such a strategic point."

While North Korea is typically used to justify the military buildup in the region, Esper's inclusion of Beijing as a target of GSOMIA indicates that the true purpose of these military alliances is the preparation for war with China. Seoul has signed up for a future conflict behind the backs of the South Korean people, a fact that is purposely obscured by the political wrangling between Seoul and Tokyo.

GSOMIA was originally signed in November 2016 and allows bilateral transfer of sensitive military information between South Korea and Japan. It is seen as a key aspect of the ballistic missile network the US is building in East Asia as a component of its war preparations against China.

Signalling his own commitment to a US war against China, South Korean president Moon criticized Tokyo last week for not spending more on its military. While suggesting that Japan was uncommitted to the war drive, the comments tacitly encourage the Abe government's drive to boost its military budget and remilitarize.

"Japan's national defense expenditures amount to less than 1 percent of its total GDP. In [South Korea's] case, it's close to 2.5 percent or 2.6 percent," Moon stated. "Yet Japan claims that the reason for its export controls is that it cannot trust South Korea in security terms."

Moon also stated, "The South Korea-US alliance is central to our security, but trilateral security cooperation with Japan is also very important. We also want to cooperate with Japan as much as possible in security terms."

While posturing as left-wing, Moon and his ruling Democratic Party of Korea have routinely lined up behind Washington's military agenda in the region. In 2017, the Moon administration ignored widespread opposition and followed through with the installation of the Terminal High-Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) battery and its corresponding radar installation aimed at China.

The current dispute between Tokyo and Seoul, which has threatened to cut across Washington's military plans, is a result of South Korea emerging since the 1990s as a direct competitor to Japanese big business. The Democrats in Seoul often utilize anti-Japanese chauvinism to defend the South Korean economic interests in industries such as

automobiles or electronics as well as to divert public attention from the country's deteriorating social and economic conditions.

The tensions between Japan and South Korea have been exacerbated by the growing global tendency to use trade war measures as a means of settling disputes, a can of worms opened up by the Trump administration as it seeks to undermine China and other potential competitors, including in Europe.

Tokyo claimed that it could not trust South Korea with receiving sensitive chemical exports, supposedly because they end up in North Korea. Its hostility to the South Korean court decision over the victims of Japanese forced labour stems from the fact that the Abe government is seeking to bury the historic crimes of Japanese imperialism in the 1930s and 1940s as it prepares for new wars.

While the dispute has been temporarily resolved, under pressure from Washington, the tensions underlying it could well erupt again in the not too distant future.

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