A Tense Time for Relations between Japan and South Korea: The GSOMIA and Moon’s Relations with the USA

On August 22, 2019, South Korea’s National Security Council adopted a resolution to withdraw from the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) between South Korea and Japan. According to the Office of the President, the agreement is not “in the country’s national interest,” given that cooperation on security issues between the two countries has undergone “serious changes” as a result of the trade war.

The agreement was signed in 2016, for the purposes of exchanging information on military and social developments in North Korea and on the country’s rocket programme. GSOMIA is a kind of symbol of the two countries’ cooperation on security issues in the face of the nuclear and missile threats posed by North Korea, and the USA aims to use the agreement as a tool to strengthen the long-standing military cooperation between Seoul and Tokyo.

It is considered that each of the two countries has specific advantages when it comes to collecting information about North Korea, and their cooperation could, in theory, create a powerful synergy. Japan has powerful intelligence technology, including reconnaissance satellites, radar systems and long-range early warning and control aircraft. The information these technologies can provide about North Korea’s submarine bases, rocket bases and ballistic missile submarines is of great value to Seoul. On the other hand, South Korea, at least by its own reckoning, has a
great deal of intelligence experience: it obtains information from North Korean defectors, from agents in areas near the border with North Korea, and from listening into and intercepting communications near the military demarcation line.

Ever since it was first signed, the agreement has provoked a great deal of debate and criticism from Korean opposition parties, but it has nevertheless been renewed twice by Moon Jae-in's government.

The discussions on scrapping the agreement flared up due to the current economic conflict between Seoul and Tokyo. Especially since Japan removed South Korea from its list of preferred trading partners, a move which Seoul sees as a form of unfair economic pressure.

In Tokyo government representatives have stressed that Japan wishes to continue with the agreement for the sake of strengthening bilateral cooperation on security issues and the promotion of regional peace and stability.

On August 20, Kim Sang-jo, Chief Presidential Secretary for Policy, informed journalists that as yet no definite steps have been taken. On the other hand, the present author is aware of unconfirmed reports that the decision to withdraw from GSOMIA was taken personally by Moon Jae-in behind the back of Kang Kyung-wha, the Foreign Minister, who only found out at a later stage.

In political circles the decision has sparked mixed reactions. Lee Hae-sik, a spokesman for South Korea’s governing Democratic Party (or Toburo), called it “a necessary response to Japan’s arrogant and preposterous measures, which are aimed at dealing a serious blow to the South Korean economy, in breach of the international system of free trade.” Two left-leaning parties, the Justice Party and the Party for Democracy and Peace, also expressed support for the move. Na Kyung-won, the floor leader of Liberty Korea, the main opposition party, has expressed fears that the economic conflict, with its roots in historical disagreements between the two countries, will affect security issues: she went so far as to suggest that the current government has moved away from the traditional alliance between South Korea, the USA and Japan towards closer links with North Korea, China and Russia. A representative of the Bareunmirae Party, Choi Do-ja, said that she is disappointed at the frivolous and emotional conduct of the current President Moon Jae-in, and that she feared that even the USA might turn away from South Korea.

On August 23, Shinzo Abe, commenting on Seoul’s refusal to renew the GSOMIA, said that South Korea was continuing to take reciprocal measures, thus damaging the relations of trust between the two countries and infringing the 1965 Treaty on Basic Relations. But Tokyo will respond by trying to preserve the relations of cooperation between South Korea, the USA and Japan, despite Seoul’s unhelpful moves. “We will continue to work closely with the USA in order to ensure regional peace and prosperity, and to protect Japan’s security,” he said before departing for the G7 summit.

Takeshi Iwaya, Japan’s Minister of Defense, also expressed disappointment concerning Seoul’s move, and emphasized that economic disputes should not impinge on security issues.

The Korea Herald, a conservative English-language newspaper, describes the Blue House’s explanations as “insufficient and unconvincing”, and, commenting on the clear damage to security cooperation between the USA, South Korea and Japan, poses a question: “One cannot but ask if the Moon Jae-in administration is determined to treat Japan as an enemy forever... The ruling camp seems to believe that it can rally support for Moon with anti-Japanese measures including the termination of the deal, but the result is a chill in our relations with the USA.”

Several conservative analysts have even described the move by South Korea as an “open rebellion against the US” and an attempt to depart from the role of junior partner to America. Other, similarly-minded commentators have gone so far as to suggest that the government is using the controversy about the agreement to distract attention form more serious scandals involving Moon Jae-in.

It is worth saying a few words about the position of the USA, which sees the GSOMIA as a key element in securing regional cooperation on security issues. Washington has, both directly and indirectly, expressed hopes that South Korea will decide in favor of renewing it. For example, when Jeong Kyeong-doo, the South Korean Defense Minister met his US counterpart, Mark Esper, the latter asked him to renew the agreement. Mark Esper said that the decision would be a setback to Washington’s decade-long efforts to bring together the two main regional alliances, and would reduce its ability to counter the growing influence of North Korea and China in the region.

On August 22, during a telephone conference with Kang Kyung-wha, the South Korean Foreign Minister, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo called on Seoul and Tokyo to continue with the dialogue process and normalize their relations. Mike Pompeo was quite open about his disappointment with Seoul’s decision, which he described as
demonstrating a serious misreading of the situation by Moon Jae-in’s government.

On August 26, US State Department spokeswoman Morgan Ortagus stated on Twitter that the US was deeply disappointed and concerned about Seoul’s decision, as it would make defending South Korea more complicated and increase the risk to U.S. forces. As conservative South Korean media have pointed out, the word “disappointed” is not often used in diplomatic circles.

US analysts have also been outspoken in their criticism of the decision. Evans Revere, former U.S. Acting Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs said in an interview: “Years from now, when historians look back on this day, they will probably conclude that the unraveling of the U.S.-centric defense and security architecture in Northeast Asia began with this Korean decision.” Mr. Revere believes that the main parties to benefit from the decision will be North Korea and China - which has, for many years, been untiring in its opposition to the three-party security alliance. He is also highly critical of Donald Trump, who, he says, clearly does not “appear to see the need for the United States to exercise leadership in the manner of his predecessors”.

As for finding a resolution to the current situation, putting relations between the two countries back on a normal footing and restoring the USA’s traditional leadership role in East Asia would require a change of administration in Seoul and Tokyo, and possibly in Washington as well.

Shin Gi-Wook, an expert on Korean issues at Stanford University, has said that “the Japan-South Korea relationship may not have hit rock bottom, but it could further deteriorate in the coming months”, and Professor William J. Perry has said that ever since Moon Jae-in came to power, Washington has had concerns that the military alliance between the US and South Korea could collapse and that Moon Jae-in might turn to China instead. By the way, hard-line conservatives in both the USA and South Korea, such as Tara O, go so far as to accuse Moon Jae-in of being a crypto-Socialist who either hopes to see his country annexed by North Korea, or wishes to establish a new military alliance, formed of the two Koreas and China.

Seoul’s initial response was to insist that it had worked closely with the USA in considering the question of withdrawing from the agreement, and that the USA had stated that it understood Seoul’s position. As Kim Hyun-chong, deputy to Chung Eui-yong, the Director of South Korea’s National Security Office, has said on a number of occasions, the South Korean government notified senior US officials of its intentions in advance, and the decision “was the result of thorough consultations with the United States.” In an emotional address to media representatives, Kim Hyun-chong described the alliance between the USA and South Korea as a huge tree with deep roots stretching back 66 years based on common values, and said that it was “wrong to assume that the termination of the GSOMIA will reduce our ability to respond to security threats. We have to take the initiative to strengthen our defense capabilities, and we need to build key security capabilities such as military reconnaissance satellites, light aircraft carriers and next generation submarines. In the course of doing so, we need to further strengthen our alliance with the United States, with whom we share the common values of democracy and the market economy.”

The USA does not see things in quite the same way. In an interview with Japanese media, the US Deputy Secretary of State flatly denied the South Korean government’s claims. On the contrary, his message was that South Korean partners had not even tried to talk things through with the US.

Moreover, when on August 26 the US embassy in Seoul retweeted Morgan Ortagus’ statement about the US being “deeply disappointed and concerned,” it provoked an angry reaction from South Korean trolls - sorry, offended patriots - with one of the comments even making an issue of the ambassador’s Japanese ancestry. The Korea Times also recommended US diplomats to “take into account the local realities and circumstances” before publishing ambiguous statements of that kind.

What possible consequences might Seoul’s decision have? According to reports, it has already provoked instability on South Korea’s stock and currency exchanges.

South Korea will have less access to information on security issues. Readers will remember that when the recent North Korean rocket tests took place the Japanese government published its data on the tests before the South Korean military made any reports, and as a result Conservative analysts expressed concern that most of the real information came from Japan and the much trumpeted expertise of South Korea’s intelligence services was greatly exaggerated.

The USA’s relations with South Korea are also getting worse. Moon Jae-in has tried to bring forward the withdrawal of US military command centers from Seoul, but Donald Trump is not short of possible responses. For starters, he
could step up trade barriers against the import of cheap South Korean goods, and he could also require South Korea to bear a larger share of the cost of the US military presence in the country. And he could go further - he could even find grounds for imposing sanctions or other forms of economic pressure.

In general, Moon Jae-in has created another “Gordian knot,” and it is still too early to talk about finding a solution. The GSOMIA expires on November 23. If the parties are able to reach an agreement before that date then South Korea may reconsider the decision it has taken. Lee Nak-yeon, South Korea’s Prime Minister, raised that possibility on August 27, in his address to a meeting of government representatives, politicians from the ruling party, and figures from the presidential administration.

However, he also said that in order for that to happen Japan would have to stop exerting economic pressure on South Korea, and he added that in the current circumstances South Korea views the exchange of military information with Japan as inappropriate and inconsistent with its national interest. During a meeting on September 1, before the ceremonial opening of the 15th Korea-Japan Hanmadang Festival in Seoul, Lee Taeho, 2nd Vice Minister of the South Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs, told his Japanese counterpart, Norikazu Suzuki, that renewing the GSOMIA was not in South Korea’s national interest.

As for the future, all we can do is reach for the popcorn, as the young folk say, and see what happens next.

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