

Reopening a Puzzle: South Korea–Japan Security Relations and Domestic Politics

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A few weeks ago, the breakdown of the South Korea–Japan General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) generated a political firestorm in Seoul. Why did GSOMIA cause such an uproar in South Korea? After all, as U.S. and Japanese experts have argued, it is in South Korea’s own interest to have such an agreement. I offer three possible explanations, but before doing so, briefly highlight the context of the recent South Korea–Japan agreement.

Under most circumstances, GSOMIA is a fairly routine agreement which permits the sharing of classified military data and intelligence. The Republic of Korea (ROK) has signed such agreements with over two dozen countries. However, in this instance, the agreement was negotiated in secret and only revealed to the public just days before the official signing. Once the deal went public, opposition party members assailed the current government for its lack of transparency on an issue sensitive to South Koreans due to Japan’s wartime past.

I present three possible reasons for the breakdown of GSOMIA and its implications for trilateral security cooperation between the United States, Japan, and South Korea. As already suggested, the first explanation is domestic politics. The ROK government bungled the deal by not making it transparent, thus turning the issue into political fodder. Closely connected to domestic politics is the second explanation: lingering historical animosity. Koreans remain sensitive about strengthening military ties with Japan given Tokyo’s unwillingness to own up to its past role during the colonial period. The third explanation is the China factor which relates to balance of power politics. Paranoid about getting caught between great power rivalries, South Korea does not want to provoke China,

or at least give China the impression that U.S.-Japan-South Korea relations are tightening at the expense of China.

Most media reports in South Korea initially cited domestic politics and historical animosity for the strong backlash. Since then, several foreign policy experts have attempted to look beyond such proximate explanations and honed in on South Korea-China relations as an underlying reason for Seoul's last minute hesitation. The China factor may have had some role to play in GSOMIA's breakdown, but several problems exist with this thesis.

On what grounds do ROK-China relations affect strengthened military ties between Japan and South Korea? Those supporting the China thesis state that ROK officials balked at signing GSOMIA because it might be perceived as part of the U.S.-led security architecture positioned against China. I disagree that this was the major reason for the political fall-out at the eleventh hour. First, the fact that the South Korean government was ready to sign GSOMIA until the uproar suggests that most ROK policy officials did not see the China factor as a major problem. Second, implied here is the idea that the U.S. was somehow pushing its two allies to make this deal. It is true that Washington would like to see trilateral relations strengthened. But as one Pentagon insider mentioned, the U.S. remains a constant, not a variable in promoting trilateral relations. The U.S. position is to always encourage trilateral relations but it tends not to over push Japan and South Korea because it relates to historical issues. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's recent comment on the comfort women issue notwithstanding, the U.S. tries not to stick its nose into tricky historical problems.

Third in the grand scheme of things, why would information sharing between Japan and Korea about intelligence regarding North Korea overly threaten China? South Korea has even signed a GSOMIA with Russia. Fourth, if South Koreans were really paranoid about irking China, they would not offer to strengthen trilateral relations with the United States two weeks later as they did at this year's ASEAN Regional Forum.

Based on my conversations with ROK officials, it is true that South Korea does not want to aggravate or unnecessarily provoke China. However, there are other mechanisms that the ROK government uses to signal its willingness to cooperate with China even as it seeks to strengthen the US-Japan-ROK security ties. This includes the relatively new China-Japan-South Korea Trilateral Cooperation Secretariat (TCS) which was proposed by the current ROK administration.

ROK-Japan relations present one of the more interesting puzzles in international relations: given common threats and their geographic proximity, the inability of two democracies to form a true alliance defies the logic of the liberal peace and political realism. In one of the first studies to examine this puzzle, Victor Cha paradoxically pinpoints the inability of ROK-Japan relations to develop beyond

a “quasi-alliance” to the United States: when U.S. commitment to both countries is strong, the incentive for Tokyo and Seoul to strength their own remains low.

In my view, however, domestic politics should be given more credit than is often given. From a realist standpoint, South Korea and Japan should want stronger ties in today’ s security environment. But domestic politics makes this complicated. The ROK government must sell the security utility of such a pact to the public, but they cannot do this without support from Japan. South Korea must receive some concession from Japan which creates political space for the ROK government to promote security cooperation. Thus, if Japan truly wants greater security cooperation and strengthen ROK-Japan ties, it would make concessions on specific contentious historical issues.

But the dilemma for Japan is that its own domestic constituents would be upset if its government “caved” under South Korean pressure. Capitulation would be perceived as a sign of weakness, especially when the Japanese population believes Koreans are “emotional,” making outrageous demands for issues which occurred decades ago. Japanese civilians were also victims twice over: by the Japanese military government and U.S. air power. In sum, Japan and Korea both have their hands tied to domestic politics. Will we see a second push for GSOMIA anytime soon? Certainly not until after the Korean presidential elections at the end of the year, even as we see improvements in broader U.S.-Japan-South Korea trilateral relations.

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