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What Went Wrong with the ROK-Japan Military Pact?

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It almost happened, but less than an hour before signing the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) with Japan, South Korea backed off from its first military cooperation pact with that country since Japanese occupation of the Korean Peninsula ended in 1945. The pact would have provided a legal framework for Seoul and Tokyo to share classified military information on North Korea's nuclear and missile programs and on China's rising military. Since the death of the North Korean dictator Kim Jong-il in December, calls for closer bilateral ROK-Japan military cooperation regarding their enigmatic and bellicose neighbor have increased.

Seongho Sheen, Associate Professor at Seoul National University, and **Jina Kim**, Associate Research Fellow at the Korea Institute for Defense Analyses, explain that “it may take time for the South Korean government to regain the trust of the Korean public and rebuild support to resume negotiations for the improvement of military relations with Japan.”

Moreover, the two governments have been making some moves to deepen cooperation, having held working-level military talks since January 2011, and last April signing a tentative agreement to exchange military intelligence. However, the fact that South Korean President Lee Myong-bak's cabinet had approved GSOMIA only three days before the scheduled announcement, without first briefing the National Assembly, unsettled the Korean media and opposition Democratic United Party. This resulted in calls of “selling the nation out” in a secret deal with Tokyo. Concerned about public anger and with a presidential election less than six months away, Lee's governing New Frontier Party demanded a postponement of the signing.

A Lost Opportunity?

South Korea already has agreements to share military intelligence with 24 other countries, including Russia and Canada. North Korea's most recent provocations, specifically April's failed missile launch, further necessitated concluding an agreement with Japan. Both countries have common interests regarding Pyongyang's nuclear and missile threats as North Korea deploys not only short-range but also mid-range ballistic missiles that target Japan, including US military bases in Okinawa, and even extending to Guam. Partly as a result of this there have been some indications of improving ROK-Japan military cooperation. South Korea participated as an observer in US-Japan joint military drills, and Japan has done the same for US-ROK military exercises. South Korea, the United States and Japan have also agreed to expand security cooperation through the Assistant Secretary-level Defense Trilateral Talks (DTT) which cover cooperation in humanitarian assistance, maritime security and disaster relief. In June, the US, Japanese, and South Korean navies conducted joint exercises in the seas south and west of the Korean Peninsula. GSOMIA could have been a new milestone in ROK-Japan relations, adding to their cultural, societal, and economic ties.

The United States has long stressed the need to enhance trilateral cooperation. This agreement, therefore, had strong US support as a necessary component of the US rebalance towards Asia. US Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Kurt Campbell in April emphasized “the need for close coordination between



the US, Japan and South Korea” and at a Senate hearing in May he alluded to plans to take “ambitious steps to increase trilateral [US-ROK-Japan] cooperation.”

The Four Problems

Unfortunately, several factors on the South Korean side led to the suspension of the much anticipated pact. First, there were procedural and legislative concerns. The agreement was put before the South Korean cabinet as an impromptu item without first holding a vice-ministerial meeting. The explanation is that the Japanese response to the draft arrived too late for the agreement to be placed on the agenda of the vice-ministerial meeting. However, there was also controversy over procedural transparency as the National Assembly was not informed about this pending agreement. Some argue that there is no obligation to report the process of working-level consultations to the National Assembly if the agreement allows only for the sharing of rudimentary military information. However, others point out that the agreement calls for both countries to share defense-related information “that requires protection in the interests of national security of the respective parties” and therefore needs ratification by the National Assembly according to the South Korean constitution.

Second, the burden of history continues to play a special role when it comes to ROK-Japan relations. It is hard to separate the issue of military cooperation from other non-military—but still nationalistic—concerns, including Japan’s sovereignty claim over the Dokdo islets, the issue of “comfort women,” and calls by Japan to name waters between the two neighbors as the “Sea of Japan.” The conclusion of any joint ROK-Japan military agreement faces obstacles as long as painful historical memories and animosity remain between the two states. The fact that the South Korean government tried to hide this contentious matter from the public further indicates the sensitivity of this issue.

Third, South Korean concerns about antagonizing China were another factor. Some public perceptions were that GSOMIA is a US-driven move to contain China’s regional influence to the detriment of Seoul’s interests.

Fourth, it is an election year in South Korea and in the feverish political atmosphere it is not easy for any political party to ignore public opinion. However, conservatives and liberals had a rare opportunity to unite on this subject as closer ROK-Japan military cooperation on issues of mutual concern is something where the interests of conservatives and liberals overlap. Unfortunately, public discourse regarding GSOMIA centers on South Korea’s national pride, a theme that unites people not to “become a betrayer by sacrificing the nation under Japan’s military ambition.” Older conservative citizens feel intense bitterness over how they were treated by the Imperial Japanese Army during the occupation of Korea and they fervently oppose any South Korean cooperation with Japan’s military. The more liberal-minded younger generation is distrustful of the government. They are reminded of the government’s handling of controversial issues—imports of US beef and the ratification of the ROK-US Free Trade Agreement—without first gaining public consensus.

Uncertain Future

Nationwide contention over the incident appears to have temporarily abated after President Lee accepted the resignation of his senior presidential secretary for national security, and the foreign ministry decided to replace the director of the bureau for Northeast Asian affairs. However, it may take time for the South Korean government to regain the trust of the Korean public and rebuild support to resume negotiations for the improvement of military relations with Japan. South Korean leaders and policy makers, along with those in the United States and Japan, are well-advised to take into consideration South Korea’s mature civic consciousness regarding further ROK-Japan coordinated military cooperation. A failure to do so will be at their own risk.

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