

Cost-Benefit Analysis of the South Korea-Japan General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA)

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The South Korean government has postponed the signing of the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) with Japan, which had been originally scheduled for June 29, reflecting the backlash from the public. Embedded in raising procedural problems, which occurred in government's push for the agreement, are broad anti-Japanese sentiments within the South Korean public opinion. For the time being, it is unlikely that the South Korean government will be able to reattempt the signing of the agreement. Due to concerns that have been raised from both the majority and minority political parties in signing the agreement and the impending presidential elections, the prospects for this agreement will depend largely on the new administration. Although it is a little too late, there should be greater efforts to step away from anti-Japanese sentiments and engage in an objective cost-benefit analysis of the South Korea-Japan GSOMIA.

North Korea's increasing military threat has contributed to the growing need for the South Korea-Japan GSOMIA. Despite sanctions from the international community, North Korea has accelerated the development of its nuclear and long-range missile programs. In order for South Korea and Japan to develop a more effective defense position, information sharing from GSOMIA on North Korea's military threat is crucial. Japan may not provide further significant contributions to the information that South Korea generates on its own and the United States provides to South Korea under the framework of the US-South Korea alliance. Nonetheless, even a small amount of information is valuable to South Korea, a country in direct confrontation with North Korea. Furthermore, under the

GSOMIA provisions, South Korea will not be obligated to provide all of its information regarding North Korea to Japan, and therefore, there should be no concerns about Japan receiving access to information that South Korea does not wish to share. In other words, there are obvious benefits to the GSOMIA with Japan in collecting information on North Korea.

Accordingly, the cost-benefit analysis of the South Korea-Japan GSOMIA should be in line with a closer examination of the repercussions to the agreement. The issue that is of frequent concern is the negative response from China. China considers the South Korea-Japan GSOMIA to be a prelude towards a South Korea-US-Japan trilateral alliance intended to contain China. As a result of the Chinese perception, a confrontational structure between the South Korea-US-Japan and the North Korea-China-Russia blocs will deepen. However, would China perceiving the South Korea-Japan GSOMIA as a prelude to a South Korea-US-Japan trilateral alliance really undermine our national interests?

In order to answer the question, an examination of the Sino-American dynamics within the Asia-Pacific regional order is needed. Behind the controversy surrounding the South Korea-Japan GSOMIA are the United States' attempts to link the US-led alliances in the Asia-Pacific region and China's criticisms of such linkage.

The United States has been operating the so-called "hub-and-spoke" alliance system, which is comprised of its alliances with Australia, Japan, the Philippines, South Korea and Thailand. In contrast to US operation of the "hub-and-spoke" system during the Cold War, the United States has been strengthening ties among its individual alliances in the post-Cold War period. That is because, above all, a systematic cooperation between the "spokes" allies is needed in order to effectively respond to new and emerging non-traditional security issues in a post-Cold War security landscape. In addition, the United States has realized that multilateral security institutions have been under-developed in the Asia-Pacific region due to the political, economic, social, and cultural differences of the component states. Thus, the United States expects the "mini-lateral" linkage of individual alliances to serve as a stepping stone towards the creation of an effective multilateral security institution.

A typical example of US-led alliances becoming linked in a "mini-lateral" setting is the US-Japan-Australia trilateral security cooperation based on the US-Australia and the US-Japan alliances. Having started as the "Trilateral Security Dialogue" in 2001, it has been upgraded to the high-level "Trilateral Strategic Dialogue" in 2006. The three countries have strengthened their security cooperation to the extent that they conduct regular military exercises. It is important to note that the security cooperation between "spokes" (Australia and Japan) has become stronger due to the linkage of the US-Australia and US-Japan alliances. The "Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation" and the "Defense Memorandum", signed in 2007 and 2008 respectively, attest to how rapidly the security cooperation has been growing between the two countries.

The tendency of the United States to link the US-led alliances in the Asia-Pacific region can also be seen in its facilitation of multinational participation in military exercises with its regional allies. Since the 2007 Australia and Japan have been irregular participants of the "Malabar" military exercises between the

United State and India. The US-Thailand “Cobra Gold” military exercises as well as the US-Philippine “Balikatan” military exercises have also been conducted in multilateral settings. South Korea has participated in the US-Japan military exercise that followed the 2010 conflict between China and Japan over the Senkaku Islands. Similarly, in an unprecedented move, 150 personnel from the United States Forces Korea participated in the US-Japan military exercises that were launched in January to February 2012.

China perceives the linkage of the US-led alliances as the encirclement of China. In particular, China has been closely watching the aforementioned strengthening of the US-Japan-Australia trilateral security cooperation. China suspects that, ultimately, the United States will likely form a small-scale Asia-Pacific version of NATO against China by incorporating India to the US-Japan-Australia tripartite. In addition, China views the strengthening of the US-Philippines, the US-Thailand and the US-Australia alliances as an “assertive return” to Southeast Asia and a grave challenge to its “core interests.” However, the United States points out that China has been maintaining a biased attitude towards North Korea’s military provocations and sparking territorial disputes with Japan and several Southeast Asian countries. In other words, from the United States perspective, the strengthening of the US-led alliances is a means of maintaining “American leadership,” which has been an essential component to stabilizing regional order. As such, a typical security dilemma in which the United States and China condemn each other as the cause of the Sino-American strategic confrontations has been taking place.

The United States and China take contradictory positions on the expansion of military exchanges between South Korea and Japan, for they approach the exchanges in terms of the Sino-American confrontations. From the perspective of the United States, the South Korea-Japan GOSMIA is a first step towards linking the US-South Korea and US-Japan alliances and further creating a “virtual alliance” relationship between the “spokes” (South Korea and Japan).¹⁾ However, from the Chinese perspective, the GSOMIA is part of the process of building a containment block consisting of South Korea, the United States and Japan against China.

Furthermore, due to China’s negative view of the expansion of South Korea-Japan military exchanges, the exchanges could paradoxically serve as leverage over China, which has been maintaining biased attitude towards North Korea’s military provocations. This is attributed to the fact that the US-South Korea relationship is a substructure of the US-China relationship to the United States, while the North Korea-China relationship is substructure of the US-China relationship to China. If South Korea helps the United States with linking the US-South Korea and US-Japan alliances and creating a virtual alliance relationship between South Korea and Japan, China will be placed in a disadvantageous security environment under the higher structure of Sino-American relations. Thus, South Korea can induce China to rectify its biased attitude towards North Korea’s military provocations by having China realize that

1) In a Congressional hearing in March 2011, the assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Kurt Campbell stressed that the institutionalization of the South Korea-US-Japan trilateral security cooperation will contribute to the development of a more integrated security system in Northeast Asia.

South Korea has little choice than to assist the United States in implementing a policy of linking its alliances if China continues to exhibit a biased attitude towards North Korea.

From this perspective, it is desirable that South Korea and Japan execute low-level military exchanges through the GSOMIA to secure leverage over China. The GSOMIA can convey a message to China that South Korea will expand its military exchanges with Japan if necessary for geopolitical reasons, despite the anti-Japanese sentiment in South Korea. If China continues to exhibit a biased attitude towards North Korea's military provocations even after the GSOMIA is signed, then South Korea and Japan should gradually step up the level of military exchanges, including a signing of the Mutual Logistics Support Agreement (MLSA). However, the extent to which the two countries engage in military exchanges should not go so far as conducting joint military exercises. Conducting joint military exercises means the consolidation of a new Cold War confrontational structure between South Korea-US-Japan and North Korea-China-Russia. The more the confrontational structure hardens, the less likely China will assume the role in deterring North Korea's nuclear and long-range missile development programs. Thus, a deliberate and strategic approach is required in determining the level of South Korea-Japan's expanding military exchanges.