

South Korea and Japan discuss first-ever military agreements

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In a controversial move, Japanese Defence Minister Toshimi Kitazawa and South Korean Defence Minister Kim Kwan-jin held talks in Seoul on Monday over the first-ever military agreements between the two countries.

The two agreements, which are yet to be finalised, involve the sharing of military intelligence—a General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA)—and mutual servicing and supplying for UN peacekeeping operations or “humanitarian” missions. Although the two agreements are symbolic, they represent a significant step toward closer security ties. According to the *Asahi Shimbun* newspaper, a GSOMIA deal would allow South Korea to become part of US-Japan ballistic missile defence framework.

Both countries are US allies and are neighbours, but there has been virtually no bilateral military cooperation. Within South Korea, deep popular suspicion and resentment persists over Japan’s brutal colonial rule of the peninsula from 1910 to the end of World War II in 1945. Successive postwar Japanese governments have never seriously addressed the crimes committed during the 1930s and 1940s in Korea and other Asian countries.

The chief driving force for closer Japanese-South Korean military ties is the Obama administration. Over the past 18 months it has aggressively sought to undermine China’s rising influence in Asia. Since US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton declared in mid-2009 that the US was “back to Asia,” Washington has been strengthening formal alliances with Japan, South Korea and Australia, as well as cultivating stronger ties with countries such as India and Vietnam, in order to tighten

a strategic encirclement of China.

A triangular alliance of the US, Japan and South Korea possesses obvious strategic advantages for the US against China. Both South Korea and Japan are near China, possess an advanced military-industrial base and house a large US military presence.

Tentative steps toward closer military relations have already taken place. Last July, when US and South Korea carried out a large-scale joint naval exercise in the Sea of Japan, Japanese naval officers were sent as observers for the first time. The pretext for the exercise was North Korea’s alleged sinking of a South Korean warship in March. The war games took place despite Chinese concerns.

Both South Korea and Japan were quick to deny that Monday’s talks were directed against China. A South Korean defence ministry statement claimed the discussions involved “ordinary exchanges and are completely unrelated to any move to keep China in check”. Instead, the ministry declared that North Korea’s “provocative acts,” including an artillery exchange between the Koreas in November, were “unacceptable and seriously disturb the peace and stability” of North East Asia.

The US has encouraged a hard-line stance by South Korea, which held a series of live-fire exercises last month that threatened to trigger a conflict. Washington actively undermined diplomatic efforts by China and Russia to ease the tensions on the Korean Peninsula and has repeatedly accused China of failing to curb Pyongyang’s “rogue” behaviour.

On Monday, South Korea rejected North Korea's latest offer of unconditional talks to end the present standoff and improve relations. The snub is based on an agreement reached by the US, Japan and South Korea last month not to engage with Pyongyang unless it accepts their dictates on a range of issues, including its nuclear program.

As the Japanese and South Korean defence ministers met, US Defence Secretary Robert Gates was heading for China, before visits to Japan and South Korea. Yesterday, Gates upped the pressure on North Korea, and thus China, by declaring that Pyongyang's nuclear and ballistic missile programs were "becoming a direct threat to the United States". In a gross exaggeration of Pyongyang's capacities, he asserted that North Korea could have a missile capable of reaching the US within five years, even though its most recent long-range missile tests in 2006 and 2009 failed badly.

There are considerable political obstacles in both Japan and South Korea to closer military relations. An unnamed Japanese defence ministry official told the *Asahi Shimbun* that even providing logistical support to the South Korean military during a crisis on the Korean Peninsula would be "an issue to work on over the next 10 years". Japan is currently constrained by the so-called pacifist clause in its constitution that would ban such action by its military.

Within Japan, there is widespread opposition to the country's remilitarisation and any involvement in US wars. Large protests erupted after Tokyo sent troops to assist the US-led occupation of Iraq in 2004—the first overseas deployment to a war zone since World War II. Huge demonstrations took place last year after the ruling Democratic Party broke its election promise to remove a major US airbase from the Japanese island of Okinawa.

Japanese Prime Minister Nanto Kan, who came to office last May, after Yukio Hatoyama was forced to resign, strongly backed the US base remaining on Okinawa, and the US-Japan alliance. He was challenged within his own party, however, by Ichiro Ozawa, who reflected concerns in the ruling elite that Japan's ties with China—its largest trading

partner—would be affected.

Similar issues face the right-wing South Korean government. President Lee Myung-Bak has taken an aggressive stance toward Pyongyang since coming to power in 2008. He brought to a virtual halt the previous "sunshine policy" to engage with North Korea and open it up to South Korean investors.

Lee's opponents, however, are disturbed at the prospect of a conflict with North Korea and the undermining of economic ties with China. An editorial in the *Chosun Ilbo* on January 5 insisted that Korean-Japanese military cooperation must be "limited". It warned that China was South Korea's largest trading partner and that it was not in "South Korea's best interests to be pushed to the forefront of the conflicting alliances in the region".

The Lee government has also avoided publicity of the defence talks with Tokyo, due to fear that the meeting would trigger protests. Small demonstrations erupted in front of the Japanese embassy in Seoul on Monday. Protestors distributed a statement opposing any Korean-Japanese military cooperation "without resolving the issue of Japan's past wrongdoing".

However, the push by the US for trilateral relations with South Korea and Japan will continue unabated, and will in turn contribute another destabilising factor to the extremely tense situation in North East Asia.



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