

Obama brings South Korean president and Japanese PM together

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2 April 2014

US President Barack Obama met last week with two of his main Asian allies—South Korean President Park Geun-hye and Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe—on the sidelines of the Nuclear Security Summit in The Hague. The meeting on March 25 was the first between Abe and Park since the two took power in December 2012 and February 2013 respectively.

Obama was forced to personally intervene to bring Park and Abe together after previous efforts to cajole and pressure them to meet had failed. Park publicly asked last November asked: “What purpose would a summit [with Abe] serve?” The failure of the two leaders to set aside their disputes has raised deep concerns in Washington that the lack of cooperation is becoming an obstacle to the US military build-up in the Indo-Pacific against China.

Obama’s “pivot to Asia”, aimed at undermining and militarily encircling China, has encouraged the revival of Japanese militarism. This in turn has embittered relations between Japan and South Korea. While locked in territorial disputes with China over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, Japan is also engaged in a similar dispute over the Dokdo Islets (known as Takeshima in Japan) that are administered by South Korea.

As it strengthens the Japanese military, the Abe government is attempting to whitewash the crimes of Japanese militarism in the 1930s and 1940s, including in its former colony of Korea. In particular, the suggestion by Chief Cabinet Secretary Suga Yoshihide that Japan would look into revising the 1993 Kono Statement has provoked outrage in South Korea. The statement was a limited apology for the Japanese military’s forced sexual exploitation of “comfort women” during World War II.

Another Japanese official who is close to Abe, Naoki

Hyakuta, bluntly declared that the Rape of Nanking, in which the Japanese army massacred up to 300,000 Chinese civilians and soldiers, “never happened.” Abe has appointed Hyakuta as a member of the board of governors of Japan’s public broadcaster NHK.

Abe wants to free the Japanese military from existing constitutional and legal constraints so that it can be deployed to aggressively assert the interests of Japanese imperialism. By seeking to deny past crimes and glorifying the military, Abe aims to condition public opinion, particularly young people, for war.

The Obama administration has pressed Japan to take a more assertive role in Asia, against China, but is concerned that the closely related revival of Japanese militarism is souring relations with South Korea and other countries in the region. In a rare public rebuke, the US expressed “disappointment” in Abe’s visit in December to the Yasukuni Shrine, a symbol of Japanese militarism.

Poor relations between Tokyo and Seoul have already undermined closer military collaboration. The two nations had been on the verge of signing a military intelligence-sharing agreement in the summer of 2012, but Park’s predecessor Lee Myung-bak was forced to back away after the deal provoked public opposition.

Park is attempting to balance between South Korea’s longstanding military alliance with Washington and its growing economic ties with China, the country’s largest trading partner. She reaffirmed her government’s commitment to the “Asian pivot” during last week’s summit meeting, but siding with the US threatens to disrupt economic relations with China.

Like Abe, Park is whipping up nationalist sentiment at home in a bid to distract the population from a growing social crisis and escalating social inequality. In doing so, the government exploits deeply rooted

resentments borne out of decades of brutal Japanese occupation that only ended in 1945. As a result, Park cannot afford to ignore Abe's efforts to whitewash this history.

Park's grandstanding against Japan also serves to distract public attention from the implications of her government's support for Obama's "pivot", which would automatically involve South Korea in any war with China. South Korea is currently home to about 28,500 American troops and its own army numbers more than 600,000. Under the terms of the alliance, US generals would command the South Korean military in the event of war.

Park is acutely aware that anti-war sentiment runs deep in South Korea, which suffered the devastating consequences of the Korean War fought by the US to maintain its police-state regime in Seoul. There is a great deal of opposition to the US military's substantial presence in the country.

Construction underway to turn the island of Jeju into a South Korean naval base has been opposed for years by the vast majority of the island's residents, as well as by others who rightfully fear that the US will use it as a staging ground for its military operations. A naval base on Jeju Island, due for completion in 2015, would further ensure South Korea was on the front line of any US conflict with China.

During the summit, Obama emphasized "military cooperation that includes joint exercises and on missile defense." To these ends, Obama is pressuring Korea to join the missile defense system along with Japan, which last October agreed to station a second X-band early-warning radar near Kyoto. So far, Seoul has not agreed to integrate its missile defense system into that of the US, but is opting instead to develop its own Korean Air and Missile Defense system.

Both South Korea and Japan are buying military hardware from the US. South Korea announced on March 24 that it was planning to purchase 40 F-35A fighter jets in a deal worth \$US6.8 billion. Japan announced in December plans to purchase 28 American F-35s as well as amphibious vehicles and drones.

These military expenditures come as the US is again ratcheting up tensions with Pyongyang. North Korea has a large military, but is equipped with aging weapons, an air force with Soviet-era fighters, and a brown-water navy that would be no match for the US or

South Korea.

Further meetings are planned between the three countries. The three leaders agreed to hold Defense Trilateral Talks on April 17–18 in Washington, which will be attended by the three nations' deputy defense officials. The talks will be the sixth round since 2008.



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