

South Korean government voices concern over Japanese “collective self-defense”

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Japan’s “reinterpretation” of the country’s constitution early this month, lifting restrictions on entering armed conflicts, has provoked nervous concerns from its closest neighbors, particularly South Korea and China, which suffered greatly under Japanese imperialism in the early half of the twentieth century. While the militarization of Japan is currently targeted at China, it is alarming Seoul, a key ally of the United States.

The “reinterpretation” issued by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe’s cabinet allows Japan to engage in “collective self-defense,” opening the door for Tokyo to send military forces overseas, whether in alliance with the United States or not, to pursue its own imperialist aims.

Japan’s remilitarization has occurred with the encouragement of Washington, which sees Tokyo as an important partner in its “pivot to Asia.” The “pivot,” which is aimed at militarily and economically encircling China, has also been backed by Seoul.

This has placed South Korean President Park Geun-hye’s administration in the precarious position of militarily aligning itself not only with the US but also Japan, Korea’s one-time imperialist oppressor. Korea’s ruling elite, moreover, often whips up anti-Japanese chauvinism class to distract mass domestic disaffection over rising inequality and unemployment.

Following the Japanese cabinet’s announcement, South Korea’s ministry of foreign affairs issued a statement declaring: “In particular, with regard to Japan’s possible exercise of its right to collective self-defense, the ROK [Republic of Korea] government makes clear once again that it will never tolerate any exercise of such right without the ROK’s request or consent on matters that can affect the security of the Korean Peninsula or national interests of the ROK.”

South Korea is also trying to balance its growing relationship with China, its largest trading partner. While a recent visit to Seoul by Chinese President Xi Jinping was aimed at building closer ties with its Korean neighbor at the expense of Japan, the Park government’s stance on the “pivot” has not changed. The South Korean president routinely reconfirms her support for Washington’s agenda. A joint statement released by Park and Xi failed to mention Japan’s new-claimed right to “collective self-defense.”

Seoul, however, is concerned about Japan’s remilitarization. Abe’s government has increasingly indicated that it is willing to act independently of Washington. This was underscored at the end of last year when Abe visited the infamous Yasukuni Shrine where 14 Class-A war criminals from World War II are interred.

Since then, Tokyo has stepped up its efforts to whitewash the war crimes of the Japanese Imperial Army, including the use of comfort women, many of whom came from Korea and were forced into sexual slavery, and the denial of the Rape of Nanjing, in which 300,000 Chinese soldiers and civilians were massacred in 1937.

Despite the hesitation Seoul has shown toward collaborating with Tokyo, the Park government has continued working ever closer with the US and acquiesced to the latter’s demands for stronger coordination with Japan.

Last month, Defense Minister Kim Kwan-jin announced that the Korean government would not oppose the placement of a THAAD ballistic missile system in South Korea. Washington has long been pressuring South Korea to join its missile system, along with Japan.

The THAAD system, ostensibly a defensive weapon,

is designed as a mop up measure should the United States attack China. In this event, the US military would target China's ability to launch a counter attack. The THAAD system would be used to take out any missiles that China managed to launch.

At the end of May, US Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel, meeting with his Korean and Japanese counterparts Kim Kwan-jin and Itsunori Onodera, agreed to work toward the signing of a trilateral military intelligence sharing agreement, something Washington has been pushing.

A bilateral agreement was almost signed between Seoul and Tokyo in 2012, but it was derailed following the discovery that then-South Korean President Lee Myung-bak had attempted to force it through while keeping the public and the National Assembly in the dark.

On the same day as Japan's announcement on "collective self-defense," the military Joint Chiefs of Staff chairmen from the three nations met for the first time for a formal meeting in Hawaii, at the prompting of the US. They made empty calls for regional stability and peace.

Japan's remilitarization faces opposition at home and in Korea. However, this finds no voice in the political establishment of either country. Both big business parties in South Korea support American imperialism. The former Democrat Roh Moo-hyun administration sent troops to both Iraq and Afghanistan, fully supporting Washington's predatory aims. Now Park is backing the "pivot," following in the footsteps of her right-wing predecessor Lee Myung-bak.



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