

US alarmed over end to South Korea-Japan intelligence sharing

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The Trump administration has expressed serious concern over South Korea's announcement last week that it will abandon its intelligence-sharing agreement with Japan which is due for renewal in November. Seoul's decision is part of the deepening rift between Washington's two military allies in North East Asia over economic and strategic issues.

On Wednesday, Randall Schriver, the Pentagon's top official for Asia, said the US was alarmed that South Korean President Moon Jae-in was ending the pact known as the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA). He called on the two countries to ensure their disputes did not impact on security issues.

"The United States has repeatedly made clear to the Moon administration that this decision would have a negative effect on not only the bilateral relationship with Japan, but on US security interests and those of other friends and allies," Schriver stated. In a thinly-veiled shot at China, he added: "I would emphasise the only winners in the Japan and Korea feud are our competitors."

Schriver referred in particular to a recent joint air patrol by Russia and China in North East Asia, claiming it was "a direct challenge to our three countries in an attempt to take advantage of the current frictions in relations." He continued: "It is critical, now more than ever, to ensure that there are strong and close relations between and among our three countries."

The Obama administration pushed strongly for intelligence sharing between Japan and South Korea as part of its "pivot to Asia," which was aimed at confronting China and preparing for war. As part of its military build-up in the Indo-Pacific, which has continued under Trump, the US has been strengthening alliances, strategic partnerships and basing

arrangements throughout the region. GSOMIA was finally signed in 2016, following an earlier more limited agreement in 2014.

While nominally aimed against North Korea, the GSOMIA is primarily directed against China. Japan and South Korea host large US military bases and are integral to the Pentagon's anti-ballistic missile system aimed at neutralizing any Chinese counterattack in the event of war. The agreement was designed to facilitate the type of rapid information transfer needed in high-intensity conflict involving missile exchanges. Previously, South Korea and Japan shared intelligence with the US, which then had to pass it on.

Kelly Magsamen, a senior defence official under Obama, told the *New York Times*: "Our hope was that it would cut down the time that the United States had to play the middle man on intelligence sharing in a crisis. It's absolutely essential. In a military crisis, such as a potentially hostile ballistic missile launch, we aren't going to have time to play referee between Tokyo and Seoul."

Tensions between South Korea and Japan have been escalating since Tokyo imposed restrictions on July 4 on the export of three key chemicals critical to South Korea's production of semiconductors and digital displays. Japan has a virtual monopoly of one of the chemicals known as photoresist, which is crucial for many high-end electronic products. Without providing any evidence, Tokyo claimed to have security concerns about the practices of South Korean importers.

This month Japan removed South Korea from its so-called "white list" of trusted countries that are not required to apply for licences to import specified technologies from Japan. It includes more than 1,000 dual-used goods and technologies that could potentially be used in military production, but are essential for

much of South Korean manufacturing. Japan again used security concerns as the pretext for its trade penalties. South Korea responded by removing Japan from its own preferential trade list.

While Tokyo has publicly denied it, the reason for its punitive measures is in retaliation for a decision by South Korea's Supreme Court last year ordering Japanese corporations to pay damages as compensation for forced Korean labour during the World War II. The Japanese government has insisted that any such claims were settled in a 1965 treaty, under which compensation was paid to the South Korean government. Seoul declares that the treaty did not preclude individual legal claims.

The governments in both countries are exploiting the tensions to whip up nationalism in an effort to shore up support at home and divide the working class. Significantly Japan announced its first trade restrictions at the opening of the campaign for the upper house election, in which Prime Minister Shinzo Abe is pushing for support to revise the constitution and remove restrictions on the country's military.

In South Korea, the ruling elites have repeatedly exploited the gross abuses during Japan's colonial rule of Korea up to 1945 to stir up Korean nationalism and anti-Japanese chauvinism. South Koreans have boycotted Japanese goods and held anti-Japanese protests in the wake of Tokyo's trade measures, under conditions of growing restiveness and strikes by workers.

Washington is particularly concerned that the South Korean government is proceeding to tear up the intelligence-sharing agreement despite entreaties from top American officials. Stephen Biegun, US special envoy on North Korea, and Allison Hooker, director of Korea policy on the White House National Security Council, met with South Korean officials in Seoul on August 21 to urge them to maintain the pact. They were not told that the South Korean government was about to announce its withdrawal from the agreement the following day.

The Trump administration, however, set the precedent for Japan's actions in its use of trade penalties based on so-called "national security considerations"—previously regarded as being out of bounds in international relations. It has used "national security" as the rationale for imposing tariffs on steel

and aluminium, and threatened Mexico with tariffs if it did not bow to US demands to halt the flow of refugees.

Over last weekend, South Korea further heightened tensions with Japan with a two-day military exercise around the disputed islet known as Dokdo, or Takeshima in Japan, that lies between the two countries.

Seoul had earlier delayed the war games, but this month decided to proceed in an expanded form, prompting protests from Tokyo. The drills by air, sea and land forces, including marines, began on Sunday and involved an Aegis-equipped destroyer and army special forces for the first time. The name was also change from the Dokdo Defence Exercise to the East Sea Territorial Protection Exercise to denote a far wider scope.



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