

Japanese and South Korean parliamentarians broach talks over trade dispute

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Lawmakers from Japan and South Korea agreed on Friday on the need to improve bilateral relations. For more than a year, tensions between the two countries' elites have risen considerably. This has not only impacted trade, but caused worry in the United States that the conflict will impact Washington's war plans in the regions. No specific steps have been put forward for resolving the dispute, however.

Forty-one lawmakers from South Korea and 110 from Japan met in Tokyo to take part in the annual general assembly of the Korea-Japan Parliamentarians Union. A statement said: "The parliaments of the two countries have decided to make more active efforts to resolve the pending issues and call for the prompt holding of the two countries' summit and high-level talks."

The statement also called for a number of other issues to be addressed, including voting rights for *zainichi* Koreans (those who immigrated to Japan before 1945 or their descendants) living in Japan, hate speech, and the promotion of cultural exchanges.

The bilateral parliamentary union agreed to set up a committee to facilitate discussion between the two countries and "to build a framework for cooperation, not conflict," in the words of Fukushima Nukaga, who heads the union for the Japanese side. His South Korean counterpart, Gang Chang-il, added that relations are "in a difficult situation, as what was a dispute over history has spread to economic and security areas."

Friday's meeting took place a little more than a week after South Korean Prime Minister Lee Nak-yeon met Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in Tokyo. Lee was in Japan for the formal enthronement of the new emperor, Naruhito. He met with Abe for more than 20 minutes to discuss the trade dispute while also passing a letter from President Moon Jae-in to Abe.

The two agreed that the current state of bilateral affairs could not continue. However, neither side offered any concrete methods to resolve the tensions. There is talk of a summit between Abe and Moon in the future, but no formal plans yet exist.

In Tokyo and Seoul and throughout the bourgeois media, the current tensions are described as primarily a historical dispute related to past crimes committed by Japanese imperialism against the Korean people. Tokyo asserts that the 1965 treaty normalizing diplomatic relations between Japan and South Korea, which included more than \$600 million in grants, loans, and business credits to Seoul, already addressed all claims to compensation.

Victims of crimes like forced labor and sexual slavery, however, did not see that money. South Korean dictator Park Chung-hee instead provided it to big business. Park viewed this as a means of consolidating his rule, providing it with legitimacy after his military coup in 1961, and preparing for war with North Korea.

Until 2012, courts in both Japan and South Korea rejected lawsuits brought by victims, arguing that the 1965 treaty barred individuals from seeking redress. The South Korean Supreme Court, however, ruled in 2012 that Korean victims of forced labor were entitled to file lawsuits. In October 2018, the Supreme Court ordered Nippon Steel and Sumitomo Metal Corporation to pay compensation to four plaintiffs, victims of forced labor during the period of Japanese colonization.

The issues for the bourgeoisie are primarily economic, however. Seoul and Tokyo are both exploiting the conflict as protectionism, as trade disputes and trade wars become the order of the day around the globe. The conflicts between South Korea and Japan have festered for nearly three decades as the former has emerged as a direct competitor to Japanese

big business in industries like automobiles and electronics.

Heightened tensions were ushered in with the Trump administration in the United States, which combined trade with national security. Trump has targeted not only China, but ostensible allies in Japan and Europe.

This July, Tokyo placed export restrictions on chemicals necessary for high-tech goods heading to South Korea, citing “national security” purposes, according to the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry. The next month, Japan dropped South Korea from its list of favorable trade partners, with Seoul responding in kind in September. South Korea has also encouraged a boycott on Japanese goods.

Japan is further taking aim at foreign companies within the country, similarly in the name of national security. A new proposed direct investment law would require foreign companies purchasing more than a 1 percent share in a Japanese company to report to the government. The current threshold is 10 percent. The US passed a similar law last year, while the United Kingdom is considering its own legislation.

The proposed law is aimed at more than Japanese imperialism’s traditional targets in China and North Korea. According to the *Financial Times*, examples of what it deems “alarming Chinese investment” are scarce. In other words, the purpose of such a law is to target economic competitors like the United States and South Korea.

These economic moves will increasingly cut across US interests in the region as trade disputes lead to destabilization. Washington is already alarmed at Seoul’s decision in August to scrap the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA), an intelligence-sharing deal between South Korea and Japan aimed at aligning the two with Washington in preparation for war with China and North Korea. The deal formally expires on November 24.

The United States expressed “strong concern and disappointment” with the decision to scrap GSOMIA and is undoubtedly pressuring Seoul behind the scenes to come to some agreement with Tokyo. The new US Joint Chiefs of Staff chairman, General Mark Milley, met his counterparts from Japan and South Korea at the beginning of October in Washington.

Afterward, Milley’s office released a statement,

saying: “The meeting focused on multilateral cooperation that ensures readiness to respond to any regional contingency and promotes long-term peace and stability in northeast Asia. The senior military leaders agreed to address mutual security concerns and utilize multilateral cooperation to enhance regional peace and stability.”

To ramp up the pressure on Washington’s two key allies in northeast Asia, Milley is planning a trip to South Korea and Japan in mid-November.



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