

Japan, South Korea seek to improve military cooperation

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Japan and South Korea are working towards repairing bilateral relations after several years of disputes over trade and other issues. The move comes as both countries increasingly line up with US war plans against China and Russia. Washington views close cooperation between two of its major allies in the region as crucial.

Japan's Vice Defense Minister for International Affairs Masami Oka and South Korea's Vice Defense Minister Sin Beom-cheol met on September 7 on the sidelines of the three-day Seoul Defense Dialogue, which began the previous day. It was the first time in six years the two sides have held in-person vice-ministerial level talks. Since coming to office in May, right-wing South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol has made clear that his administration will work to strengthen cooperation with Tokyo.

Sin stated afterwards that the talks “were held as both sides feel it is necessary to normalize defense cooperation between South Korea and Japan.” He added: “We agreed to continue cooperation and recognize the importance of South Korean, US, and Japanese security cooperation in order to respond to and contain the North Korean nuclear and missile threats.”

While North Korean “threats” are the pretext, closer relations between Tokyo and Seoul come as Washington deepens its military preparations for war with China while stepping up its proxy war in Ukraine against Russia.

In Asia, the US has carried out a number of provocations over Taiwan, which is a part of China under the “One China” policy. Washington formally claims to adhere to the policy, but is increasingly challenging it, goading Beijing into taking forcible action to prevent the US from ensuring its strategic and

economic domination over the island. This includes the Biden administration's recent approval of \$1.1 billion in arms sales to the island.

Tokyo has likewise followed in Washington's footsteps, conducting its own provocations. These include sending a delegation of lawmakers to Taiwan last month, only a few weeks after US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to the island sharply raised tensions with Beijing. Seoul is lining up evermore explicitly with US and Japanese imperialism in their war drive against China.

Among the issues Oka and Sin discussed is an incident in December 2018 involving a South Korean naval vessel and a Japanese military patrol aircraft in the Sea of Japan, which is still an impediment to military cooperation. At the time, Tokyo accused the South Korean side of locking its fire-control radar onto the Japanese plane, considered one step before actually opening fire. Seoul accused the Japanese plane of conducting a threatening, low-altitude flyby of the vessel and denied locking onto the plane. Instead, Seoul stated the vessel was using a radar system not connected to the ship's fire-control system to locate a North Korean fishing boat that had sent a distress signal.

The incident contributed to the deterioration of Tokyo and Seoul's relationship, which continued to decline the following year as a result of trade disputes. The Moon Jae-in administration at the time also intended to allow a 2016 US-backed intelligence sharing pact with Japan, known as the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA), to expire in November 2019, and only agreed to extend the agreement under pressure from Washington.

Despite speculation before the meeting, Oka and Sin reportedly did not discuss the “normalization” of the

pact. Seoul, however, has stated that it intends to normalize GSOMIA with Tokyo, in the interest of a “future-oriented” relationship. A month after the new Yoon government took office, Foreign Minister Park Jin pledged during a June press conference with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken in Washington, “We want GSOMIA to be normalized as soon as possible together with the improvement of the Korea-Japan relationship.”

Washington considers GSOMIA a key aspect of its war preparations and the operation of its regional anti-ballistic missile systems. The ability for Japan and South Korea to quickly share military intelligence during a conflict is crucial, especially given the fact that the US assumes control of the South Korean military in the event of war.

The US ballistic missile system includes the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) battery and AN/TPY-2 radar stationed in South Korea as well as two additional AN/TPY-2 radars stationed in Japan. The system is designed not to protect the populations of the two countries from supposed Chinese or North Korean threats, but to shield US bases from counterattacks in a US-instigated war. The THAAD battery in South Korea, given its placement, does not even have the range to cover Seoul, with its population of 10 million people.

On the same day as the talks were held in Seoul, US, Japanese, and South Korean officials held a trilateral meeting in Tokyo. The participants included Sung Kim, the US special envoy for North Korea, Takehiro Funakoshi, Japan’s director-general of the Asian and Oceanian Affairs Bureau at the Foreign Ministry, and South Korea’s Kim Geon, special representative for Korean Peninsula Peace and Security Affairs. Funakoshi and South Korea’s Kim both stated that their respective governments would work to improve relations.

The three accused North Korea of preparing to carry out a seventh nuclear test, a claim that they have all been making for months. They stated there would be “resolute responses” to a new test, though did not elaborate what this would entail. The US and its allies have boxed North Korea into a corner through long-standing and crippling sanctions on Pyongyang that have isolated the impoverished country from the world economy.

Last month the US and South Korea resumed large scale military exercises effectively ending a deal struck by Trump with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un to suspend such war games in return for a halt to North Korean nuclear and long-range missile testing.

At last week’s talks, South Korea’s Kim also talked about Seoul’s “audacious” economic plan for North Korea if Pyongyang demonstrates to Washington’s and Seoul’s satisfaction it has taken sufficient steps towards denuclearization. The purpose of Seoul’s offer, with the support of Washington, is to try and pull Pyongyang out of Beijing’s orbit, and neutralize the North prior to a conflict with China. However, in August, Kim Yo-jong, a leading figure in Pyongyang’s Stalinist bureaucracy and the sister of North Korean leader Kim Jong-un, denounced Seoul’s offer as “childish” and “repulsive.”

Ultimately, the developing relationship between Tokyo and Seoul is another step towards a US-led war with China, whether instigated directly with Beijing over Taiwan or over North Korea and its nuclear and missile programs.



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