

BACKGROUND

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Washington Should Urge Greater South Korean–Japanese Military and Diplomatic Cooperation

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Abstract

Greater military and political cooperation between South Korea and Japan would protect South Korean, Japanese, and U.S. national interests in Asia. The growing North Korean and Chinese security threats to the region have motivated South Korea and Japan to cooperate more, but historical animosities and recent diplomatic missteps have constrained bilateral cooperation. The U.S. can best facilitate increased South Korean–Japanese cooperation by creating opportunities for more robust trilateral cooperation and by continuing to maintain the stabilizing force of a robust forward-deployed U.S. military presence in the region.

The Obama Administration has initiated what it calls an “Asia pivot” to demonstrate America’s commitment to peace and security in the Asia–Pacific, particularly in the face of a rising China and belligerent North Korea. The American initiative, a multifaceted strategy affirming U.S. resolve to protect national interests in Asia, has been strong in rhetoric but weak in implementation.

The Obama Administration’s bold rhetoric that its defense cuts will not degrade U.S. security capabilities in Asia drowned out the sections identifying the need for greater allied contributions. Asian and European allies have long underfunded security requirements, making it more critical that they now devote greater resources to their security needs.

Greater multinational cooperation would enhance allied military capabilities. Both South Korea and Japan have extensive, highly capable militaries. Washington has strong relationships with both countries, but the third leg of the military triad—between Seoul and Tokyo—remains virtually nonexistent due to bitter historic animosities arising from Japan’s brutal 35-year occupation of the Korean Peninsula (1910–1945) and bilateral territorial disputes.

KEY POINTS

- U.S. national interests in Asia—ensuring regional stability, protecting freedom of maritime navigation, and peaceful resolution of disputes—benefit from greater military cross-connectivity among America’s allies, particularly in light of growing Chinese and North Korean security threats.
- Seoul and Tokyo have highly capable militaries, but historical animosities from Japan’s colonial occupation of Korea continue to constrain their bilateral relationship and military cooperation.
- A recent resurgence of South Korean and Japanese nationalism led to the collapse of a planned military agreement and deteriorating bilateral relations.
- Washington should urge both allies to repair relations and strengthen military cooperation to improve defenses against common threats. The United States can assist by maintaining a strong alliance with each ally to alleviate their security concerns.
- Maintaining these alliances requires a strong forward-deployed U.S. military presence and sufficient military resources to pose a credible deterrent to potential aggressors in Asia.

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In recent years, driven by common concerns over rising Chinese and North Korean security threats, Seoul and Tokyo have taken preliminary steps to advance relations by exchanging observers during military exercises and allowing trilateral participation in what had been bilateral training events with the United States. However, South Korea's last-minute refusal to sign a military cooperation accord with Tokyo in June 2012 and rapidly deteriorating bilateral relations after South Korean President Lee Myung-bak's August trip to islets claimed by both countries show the constraints on greater military coordination.

The failure by Seoul and Tokyo to implement the military agreement hinders both countries' national security objectives and impedes U.S. security objectives in Asia. Despite these difficulties, Washington should continue urging both allies to strengthen military cooperation to improve deterrence and defense against common threats. However, Washington needs to walk a fine line, neither appearing to take sides in territorial disputes nor becoming embroiled in highly emotional historic issues.

The United States can assist best by maintaining a strong alliance with both allies as a means of allaying each country's security concerns about the other. This approach requires Washington to maintain a strong forward-deployed military presence in the Western Pacific and to devote sufficient military resources to be a credible deterrent to potential aggressors in Asia.

The Scrapped Military Agreement

In June 2012, Seoul and Tokyo were scheduled to sign a bilateral military agreement to improve joint security capabilities and continue nascent efforts to improve relations. Then, less than an hour before the ceremony, Seoul canceled due to flaring domestic criticism and legislative backlash over the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA), a pending agreement with South Korea's former colonizer.

The GSOMIA would have been the first military pact between Seoul and Tokyo since the end of Japanese occupation of the Korean Peninsula in 1945. It would have provided a legal framework for the exchange and protection of classified information about North Korea's nuclear and missile programs, potential military incursions and terrorist or cyber attacks, and China's increasing military power. The agreement would also have provided South Korea with access to information collected by Japan's high-tech intelligence satellites, AEGIS ships, and early-warning and anti-submarine aircraft.

President Lee Myung-bak had vowed to continue pushing for approval of the accord during the remainder of his term, which ends in February 2013. However, approval is unlikely given rapidly deteriorating bilateral relations over historic and sovereignty issues.

Pyongyang: A Catalyst for Seoul-Tokyo Cooperation

Since the mid-1990s, growing South Korean and Japanese

concerns over the North Korean military threat have triggered tentative moves to improve bilateral relations and military cooperation. (See text box, "Growing South Korean-Japanese Military Cooperation.") This effort assumed greater urgency after Pyongyang's dangerous provocations during 2009-2012. A South Korean official explained that "as North Korea raises its threat of provocation, a consensus has formed that there needs to be closer military cooperation among [South Korea, Japan, and the United States]."¹

GROWING SOUTH KOREAN AND JAPANESE CONCERNS OVER NORTH KOREA'S MILITARY THREAT HAVE TRIGGERED TENTATIVE MOVES TO IMPROVE BILATERAL RELATIONS AND MILITARY COOPERATION.

A senior South Korean official commented that the need for South Korea and Japan to share military intelligence "became clear each time North Korea tested a nuclear weapon or launched a long-range missile, but the lack of an accord made that impossible. We decided to rush things [after the April 2012 missile launch]."² Tokyo saw benefits to exchanging information with South Korea after it failed to detect the North Korean missile launch, which would have flown over Okinawa if the missile had not blown up shortly after liftoff.

In January 2011, the South Korean and Japanese defense ministers agreed to pursue agreements

1. Jeong Yong-soo, "3-Way Military Drill Would Be a First," *JoongAng Ilbo*, May 9, 2012, <http://koreajoongangdaily.joinsmsn.com/news/article/article.aspx?aid=2952594&cloc=joongangdaily|home|newslist1> (accessed September 7, 2012).

2. "Cabinet Approves Military Pact with Japan," *The Chosun Ilbo*, June 28, 2012, http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2012/06/28/2012062800632.html (accessed September 7, 2012).

Growing South Korean–Japanese Military Cooperation

- **1994** South Korea–Japan defense ministerial meetings begin.
 - South Korean naval ship visits Tokyo for the first time.
- **1996** Japanese naval ships visit Busan, South Korea.
- **1999** South Korea, Japan, and the United States establish the Trilateral Coordination and Oversight Group (TCOG) to coordinate policy toward North Korea.
 - South Korean and Japanese navies conduct their first bilateral field exercise, consisting of search and rescue training near Busan.
- **2008** Washington and Seoul agree on greater “security cooperation among South Korea, the United States, and Japan to maintain regional stability.” The three countries vow to step up joint military exercises.⁴
 - South Korea, Japan, and the United States revive senior-level tripartite talks after a five-year hiatus. The three nations discuss the “Northeast Asian political situation, regional cooperation and major international security issues.”⁵
 - Japan military officers participate in U.S.–South Korean naval exercises as observers.
- **2010** South Korean, Japanese, and U.S. foreign ministers agree to augment mutual military efforts to deal more effectively with North Korean security threats.
 - Japanese naval vessel participates in exercises near Busan.
 - South Korean military officers participate in U.S.–Japanese exercises as observers.
- **2011** Japanese naval officers observe U.S.–South Korean exercises in July, and South Korean observers participate in U.S.–Japan exercises in December.⁶
- **2012** June: South Korea, Japan, and the United States conduct their first trilateral naval exercise in nonterritorial waters near South Korea’s Jeju Island. The exercise affirms regional peace and stability while enhancing allied military interoperability, operational proficiency, and readiness. The exercise includes “integrated helicopters operations, visit, board, search and seizure exchanges and demonstrations, communication links interoperability, dynamic ship maneuvers, and liaison officer exchanges.”⁷
 - July: South Korean, Japanese, Australian, and Singaporean forces conduct a joint air exercise in Hokkaido to practice operations against the proliferation of nuclear weapons. It is the third Proliferation Security Initiative exercise hosted by Japan.
 - August: South Korea, Japan, and the United States conduct joint naval exercises off Hawaii focusing on search and rescue, search and seizure, and counterpiracy scenarios.

3. “The Story Behind the Korea–Japan Military Pact.” *The Chosun Ilbo*, June 29, 2012, http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2012/06/29/2012062900980.html (accessed September 7, 2012).

4. “Korea, Japan, U.S. to Step Up Joint Drills,” *The Chosun Ilbo*, November 3, 2008.

5. Jin Dae-woong, “Seoul, Tokyo, Washington Hold Security Talks,” *The Korea Herald*, October 14, 2008.

6. Vice Admiral Jung Ho-sub, “ROK–US–Japan Naval Cooperation in the Korean Peninsula Area: Prospects for Multilateral Security Cooperation,” *International Journal of Korean Studies*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (Spring/Summer 2012), p. 195, <http://www.icks.org/publication/pdf/2012-SPRING-SUMMER/9.pdf> (accessed September 7, 2012).

7. Craig Scanlan, “U.S. Military Conducts Naval Drills with Japan & South Korea and Live-Fire Exercise with ROKN,” *Japan Security Watch*, June 22, 2012, <http://jsw.newpacificinstitute.org/?p=10351> (accessed September 7, 2012).

on military intelligence sharing and logistics cooperation. In April 2012, South Korean Deputy Director of Defense Shin Kyung-soo and the Japanese Director of the Northeast Asia Division of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs preliminarily initialed the GSOMIA. South Korean Defense Minister Kim Kwan-jin was scheduled to sign the GSOMIA in May, but he cancelled his trip after resistance by opposition legislators. U.S. Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta reportedly urged Defense Minister Kim to expedite the agreement with Tokyo during their June 2012 “2+2” meeting of foreign and defense ministers.³

In May, Seoul had also put on hold the proposed bilateral Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement (also known as the Mutual Logistic Support Agreement), which would have allowed the two nations to exchange basic military logistical supplies, such as food and fuel, during U.N.-sponsored peacekeeping operations overseas. It would also enable Japan to provide logistical support during a Korean crisis.

Enabling Intelligence Exchange

Although the GSOMIA triggered an uproar in South Korea, the accord is actually a simple document that delineates technical procedures for protecting classified military information shared between Seoul and Tokyo. The accord describes methods for using, storing, protecting, transporting, and disseminating classified information.⁸

Contrary to claims made by some critics, the agreement does *not* provide carte blanche access by each

country to all of the other country’s classified information. It contains no requirement to divulge information, allowing each government to decide which data to share. South Korea already has similar agreements with 24 countries, including Russia.

The Korea–Japan GSOMIA, while seemingly minor in scope, is far-reaching in its impact because it would enable greater bilateral intelligence sharing, thus enhancing allied military capabilities. Furthermore, by increasing transparency and building trust between Seoul and Tokyo, the GSOMIA could become a stepping stone and confidence-building measure leading to even more meaningful bilateral military cooperation. The integral military relationship that Washington has with both allies would serve as a security guarantor to enable South Korea and Japan to overcome historic suspicions and animosities.

Hostages to History

Regrettably, the inability of these two countries to implement even a minor military accord reveals the depth of lingering South Korean resentment toward Japan. Despite vibrant and far-reaching economic and trade ties, similar democratic political systems, and shared strategic views of the international order, South Korea and Japan continue to have a very strained and tense relationship.

Japan feels that it has apologized repeatedly for its occupation and wartime actions. Moreover, Tokyo has pursued a postwar pacifist security policy, has focused its military on self-defense, and does not pose a threat of invasion to its neighbors.

However, Japanese attempts at atonement and reconciliation have been undermined by the overly cautious wording of the government’s apologies, Tokyo’s territorial claims, and occasional provocative and insensitive comments by government officials. For example, Osaka Mayor Toru Hashimoto claimed in August, “There is no evidence that people called comfort women were taken away by violence or threat by the (Japanese) military” during World War II.⁹

Historical issues would not continue to be issues if Japan had atoned more forthrightly and repeatedly for its past actions. Tokyo’s continued reliance on periodic and reluctant affirmation of decades-old legalistic statements concerning responsibility is clearly an obstacle to reconciliation with other Asian nations.

When the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) assumed power in 2009, some predicted that Japan’s relations with its neighbors would improve because the party would not be wedded to the overly cautious atonement statements of previous administrations. But the DPJ has made no more progress than its predecessors.

Korean President’s Trip Escalates Strains with Japan

President Lee Myung-bak made the first trip by a South Korean president to the disputed Dokdo/Takeshima Islands on August 10. Lee sought to affirm Seoul’s sovereignty in response to perceptions of renewed Japanese territorial claims and to counter domestic political criticism of his earlier outreach to Tokyo. Lee’s excursion to the islands—and subsequent call on the

8. Agreement Between the Government of the Republic of Korea and the Government of Japan on the Protection of Classified Information, <http://www.piie.com/blogs/nk/?p=6729> (accessed September 7, 2012).

Sensitive Historical Issues and Territorial Disputes

Japanese Occupation. South Korea continues to resent Japan's brutal colonial occupation of the Korean Peninsula from 1910–1945 and its perceived insufficient repentance.

Japanese Textbooks. South Korea perceives that Japanese textbooks distort historical facts and minimize or deny Japanese atrocities.

“Comfort Women.” During World War II, hundreds of thousands of women, including many South Koreans, were forced to work as sex slaves or “comfort women” for Imperial Japanese forces. South Korea and other Asian nations seek Japanese apologies and compensation to the women.

The Dokdo/Takeshima Islands. Both Seoul and Tokyo claim sovereignty over small islets in the waters between the two countries. South Korea currently controls the islets and refuses to submit the dispute to international agencies for resolution. The United States remains neutral in the dispute.

East Sea/Sea of Japan. Citing historical maps, South Korea argues that the body of water separating Japan and Korea should be called the East Sea or jointly named with the more common Sea of Japan. In 2012, the U.S. announced that it would continue to label it as the Sea of Japan, but the Obama Administration stated that this “in no way implies an opinion regarding any issue related to sovereignty” and that it “was longstanding United States policy to refer to each sea or ocean by a single name.”¹⁰

Japanese government and emperor to offer more “sincere” apologies— inflamed already tense relations with Tokyo.

Japanese Foreign Minister Koichiro Gemba warned that Tokyo would respond firmly to Lee's trip and that it “would definitely have a large impact” on relations between the two countries. Tokyo lodged strong official protests, postponed the annual bilateral finance ministers meeting, called in the South

Korean envoy to Japan, and recalled its ambassador from Seoul. The only other time that Japan recalled its envoy to Seoul was in 2005 after the Japanese ambassador publicly claimed that the islands belonged to Japan. Tokyo has suggested that it may also postpone a planned summit meeting and cancel a bilateral currency-sharing agreement designed to alleviate investor concerns during a financial crisis.

Politics Trumps Strategic Interests

The Lee administration fumbled the handling of the GSOMIA. The cabinet approved the pact, but only after bypassing normal lower-level ministerial review procedures. Nor did the foreign and defense ministries report the agreement to the National Assembly. Whether it was an attempt to keep the agreement secret (as critics charge) or bureaucratic bungling, the administration's inept handling of this contentious issue triggered protests against President Lee and rekindled public anti-Japanese sentiment.

The presidential Blue House and the foreign ministry pointed fingers at each other for the diplomatic and political fiasco. Kim Tae-hyo, the senior presidential secretary for national security strategy, eventually resigned to take responsibility for mishandling the controversy.

The opposition parties, reeling from scandals and accusations of “pro-North Korea” policies, seized the opportunity to attack the conservative president and ruling party with the even worse epithet of “pro-Japan” leanings. Lee Hae-chan, chairman of the main opposition Democratic United Party, criticized the Lee administration for attempting to pass the agreement secretly and declared that the accord is “like offering military secrets to Japan's Self-Defense Forces.”¹¹ Lee Hae-chan accused the administration of seeking “to give access without

9. Eric Johnston, “No Evidence Sex Slaves Were Taken by Military: Hashimoto,” *The Japan Times*, August 23, 2012, <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/text/nn20120823a6.html> (accessed September 7, 2012).

10. “U.S. Declines to Adopt ‘East Sea’ Name,” *The Chosun Ilbo*, July 2, 2012, http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2012/07/02/2012070201221.html (accessed September 7, 2012).

11. “Japan, South Korea Put Off Signing of 1st Military Pact at Last Minute,” *Mainichi Shimbun*, June 29, 2012.

restriction to military facilities and intelligence in seeking to forge a military intelligence treaty with a country that invaded our nation in the past.”¹² He called for the resignations of the prime minister, foreign minister, and defense minister.

The ruling Saenuri Party, worried over its chances in the upcoming presidential election, sought to minimize the fallout by quickly distancing itself from the increasingly unpopular President Lee. Ruling party legislators jumped on the nationalist bandwagon. Lee Hahn Koo, the Saenuri Party’s floor leader, stated that the ruling party believes the pact “runs contrary to public sentiment and it is not acceptable to try to sign the pact hurriedly.”¹³

The South Korean media across the ideological spectrum exacerbated the situation by warning of resurgent Japanese militarism, including Tokyo’s supposed intent to develop nuclear weapons. These South Korean fears run counter to the reality of Japan’s aversion to assuming a large security role or removing restrictions on its military forces. The conservative *Chosun Ilbo* warned that “there are suspicions that Japan is trying to expand the operating area of its Aegis destroyers to the West Sea using North Korea’s missile threat as an excuse.”¹⁴

The far-left *Hankroyeh* warned that “Japan’s proactive approach

[indicates] intentions to intervene in the event of an emergency on the Korean Peninsula,” including sending military forces to rescue Japanese residents in South Korea.¹⁵ The paper accused the Lee administration of “getting uncomfortably cozy with former colonial occupier” and favorably quoted the Korean Council for Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan, which claimed that the GSOMIA would “open the sluice gate of Japan’s militaristic ambitions.”¹⁶

The Seoul-based Asan Institute concluded that the media played a large role in creating opposition to the GSOMIA. Specifically:

[The media focused] almost solely on the domestic politics of the agreement, the historical issues effecting relations between Korea and Japan, and the U.S. role in the signing of the agreement. According to a report filed by the Korea Broadcasting System analyzing the coverage of the GSOMIA, only 5% of all media reports covered the actual contents of the agreement.¹⁷

The Asan Institute concluded that, “while historical issues do come into play [resistance to the agreement] was driven more by opposition to President Lee himself.”¹⁸

The Costs of the Failed Agreement

The failure by Seoul and Tokyo to implement the GSOMIA hinders both countries’ national security objectives and impedes U.S. security objectives in Asia. The lack of an agreement will prevent Seoul and Tokyo from exchanging information on North Korean and Chinese military developments. Although both allies have individual intelligence-sharing agreements with Washington, each has its own intelligence assets that provide useful information to refine security assessments.

Japan had high hopes that the agreement would strengthen its intelligence gathering on North Korea. During Pyongyang’s April 2012 long-range missile launch, Tokyo was geographically stymied from gaining trajectory information that could have assisted Japanese missile defense units if it had become necessary for them to engage the North Korean rocket. If the GSOMIA had been in place, Seoul could have shared timely and reliable information from its AEGIS ships.

The GSOMIA is an essential step in building a comprehensive allied missile defense system in Asia that can combat the North Korean missile threat more effectively. Integrating South Korean, Japanese, and U.S. warning sensors and tracking radars

12. “Main Opposition Chief Demands PM’s Resignation over Treaty,” *The Dong-a Ilbo*, July 2, 2012, <http://english.donga.com/srv/service.php3?bicode=050000&bid=2012070228608> (accessed September 7, 2012).

13. “Japan, South Korea Put Off Signing of 1st Military Pact at Last Minute.”

14. “Japan to Deploy Aegis Destroyers Near West Sea,” *The Chosun Ilbo*, May 31, 2012, http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2012/05/31/2012053100787.html (accessed September 7, 2012).

15. Park Byong-su, Kim Kyu-won, and Jeong Nam-ku, “Potentially Landmark Military Pact Agreed to by Korea and Japan,” *The Hankroyeh*, June 28, 2012, http://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_international/540030.html (accessed September 7, 2012).

16. *Ibid.*

17. Jiyeon Kim, Karl Friedhoff, and Chungku Kang, “Asan Monthly Opinion Survey,” Asan Institute, July 2012, p. 5.

18. *Ibid.*, pp. 4 and 6.

to enable trilateral sharing of information would increase security for all three countries.

THE GSOMIA IS AN ESSENTIAL STEP IN BUILDING A COMPREHENSIVE ALLIED MISSILE DEFENSE SYSTEM IN ASIA THAT CAN COMBAT THE NORTH KOREAN MISSILE THREAT MORE EFFECTIVELY.

The Need to Overcome History

The historic and territorial concerns that stand between Japan and South Korea are very real and have a significant impact on domestic politics and foreign policies, but South Korean and Japanese leaders in the executive and legislative branches need to rise above the fray and separate these issues from policymaking. This does not, as South Koreans fear, mean reducing leverage or abandoning efforts to resolve historic and territorial disputes. The two countries can look forward while not forgetting the past if their leaders can resist politically advantageous nationalism and instead emphasize that controversial statements by individuals do not represent national policies.

Seoul should make it clear to its populace that improving military cooperation with Japan is beneficial because it enhances South Korean security. Japan provides a critical base of support for U.S. forces defending South Korea during a conflict with Pyongyang. Seven U.S. bases in Japan are designated as part of the United Nations Command Rear, which maintains the status of forces agreement for U.N. forces

in Japan during peacetime and would serve as a staging area during a Korean crisis. Japan would also likely be a key economic contributor to Korean unification.

Without sustained efforts by both South Korea and Japan, the ghost of history will continue to haunt policymaking. Improving bilateral relations will be difficult for the remainder of the year because of forthcoming leadership changes in South Korea and Japan. Political campaigns have a tendency, if not an eagerness, to appeal to nationalism. Japan's revolving door of weak prime ministers has constrained building a strong enough relationship between leaders to enable them to push back against domestic constituencies that reject reconciliation.

WITHOUT SUSTAINED EFFORTS BY BOTH SOUTH KOREA AND JAPAN, THE GHOST OF HISTORY WILL CONTINUE TO HAUNT POLICYMAKING.

The fact that historical issues continue not only to constrain reconciliation, but also to cause deteriorating relations and prevent Asian nations, particularly key American allies, from addressing today's common threats is disappointing and worrisome.

Despite the collapse of the GSOMIA, there had been some positive developments, although they took place prior to President Lee's trip to the disputed islands. During the June 2012 meeting of their foreign and defense ministers, the U.S. and South Korea reaffirmed "the importance of trilateral security collaboration with Japan for regional

peace and stability. The ministers committed to strengthening mechanisms for trilateral security cooperation and coordination, including through the assistant secretary-level Defense Trilateral Talks."¹⁹ In July 2012, the U.S., Japanese, and South Korean foreign ministers agreed to "continue close consultations for dealing effectively with common security threats" and "close cooperation on global issues, including anti-terrorism efforts, human rights, counter-piracy efforts, disarmament and non-proliferation, maritime security, freedom of navigation, and energy security."²⁰

Missile Defense

An inability to defend against missile attacks leaves South Korea and Japan vulnerable to attack and more susceptible to North Korean intimidation and threats. The United States has tried to develop common missile defense policies to defend the region against missile attacks from North Korean and Chinese launch sites but has achieved only mixed results.

Although Tokyo has long pursued a minimalist security policy and reduced its defense budget for 10 consecutive years, it has significantly augmented its missile defense program. During the past decade, the U.S. and Japan have made considerable strides in ballistic missile defense cooperation and interoperability.

In contrast, South Korean Presidents Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun have downplayed the North Korean missile threat. These progressive leaders feared that deploying a missile defense system or even criticizing North Korea

19. U.S. Department of State, "Joint Statement of the 2012 United States–Republic of Korea Foreign and Defense Ministers' Meeting," June 14, 2012, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2012/06/192333.htm> (accessed September 7, 2012).

20. U.S. Department of State, "Trilateral Joint Statement," July 12, 2012, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2012/07/194894.htm> (accessed September 7, 2012).

would anger Pyongyang, leading to a collapse of the inter-Korean engagement policy, and strain relations with China. President Roh resisted joining an integrated missile defense system with the United States and limited the South Korean response to building an independent, low-tier missile shield.

By linking U.S., South Korean, and Japanese sensors, the allies could “defeat any future North Korean missile attack, protect vital U.S. military capabilities based in Japan or Guam, minimize the risk that an intentional North Korea provocation could lead to an all-out war, and help prevent Japan from taking an independent response,” according to South Korean Vice Admiral Jung Ho-sub.²¹ However, implementing a regional missile defense network would require Seoul and Tokyo to share security information. Thus, the collapse of the GSOMIA prevents progress on implementing a regional missile defense network that includes South Korea.

Anti-Submarine Warfare

The U.S., South Korea, and Japan should emphasize trilateral cooperation in anti-submarine warfare (ASW) and mine warfare. According to South Korean Vice Admiral Jung Ho-sub:

[The South Korean navy] alone cannot deal with a North Korean submarine threat.... It has limited ASW assets for the protection of Sea Lines of Communication

around the major harbors and the vital waters near the Korean Strait. Also, an insufficient number of U.S. naval assets are permanently stationed around South Korea’s vital sea lanes.²²

Japan has strong ASW and mine-sweeping capabilities. The GSOMIA would enable Seoul and Tokyo to share intelligence on the North Korean submarine threat, enhancing joint exercises and cooperation. The South Korean and Japanese navies are “uniquely suited for multilateral cooperation because of their intrinsic unobtrusive nature as over-the-horizon security forces, out of public view.”²³

The two countries have a potential for “greater compatibility in military capabilities over time, as South Korea builds up a blue-water navy and Japan develops an expeditionary ground capability,” according to James Schoff of the Institute for Foreign Policy Analysis.²⁴ Japan is moving incrementally to participate in overseas missions, albeit only in extremely narrowly defined, non-dangerous missions and after significant prodding by the international community. It may even be possible to identify niche capabilities among South Korean and Japanese forces that might enable them to take the lead in certain circumstances or to complement U.S. forces.²⁵

Trilateral training can occur far from the Korean Peninsula. Mine-sweeping exercises near the Strait of Hormuz and anti-piracy operations

in the Gulf of Aden, for example, not only serve common allied interests, but also develop skills and familiarity that could be applied in a Korean crisis. This is similar to adjacent police departments jointly developing, coordinating, and practicing contingency plans to increase response effectiveness during a crisis.

The Lee Myung-bak administration quietly expanded and improved South Korean–Japanese military cooperation. A U.S. official commented privately that South Korea and Japan have quietly increased the scope and sophistication of military engagement.²⁶ However, bilateral relations deteriorated during the Roh Moo-hyun administration after Japanese assertions of sovereignty over Dokdo/Takeshima and after Roh responded with nationalist rhetoric to reverse his falling domestic popularity.

Washington Carefully Straddling the Fence

Since the resurgence of the South Korean–Japanese diplomatic dispute, the United States has sought to avoid alienating either critical ally. Washington maintains a strictly neutral position on sovereignty of the Dokdo/Takeshima Islands and has declined to comment on Tokyo’s request to take the issue to the International Court of Justice.

Responding to escalating South Korean and Japanese invective over historical issues, State Department spokesperson Victoria Nuland commented:

21. Jung, “ROK-US-Japan Naval Cooperation in the Korean Peninsula Area.”

22. *Ibid.*, pp. 201–202.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 193.

24. James L. Schoff, “Tools for Trilateralism: Improving US-Japan-Korea Cooperation to Manage Complex Contingencies,” Institute for Foreign Policy Analysis, 2005, p. 39, <http://www.ifpa.org/pdf/Tools.pdf> (accessed September 7, 2012).

25. *Ibid.*, p. 56.

26. Interview by author, August 2012.

Both of these countries are strong, important, valued allies of the United States. It's obviously not comfortable for us when they have a dispute between them, so our message to each of them is the same: Work this out, work it out peacefully, work it out through consultation.²⁷

What Should Be Done

All three parties need to take steps to improve regional security. The United States should:

- **Publicly emphasize the need to strengthen U.S.–South Korea–Japan trilateralism to enhance allied security capabilities.** The United States should incorporate its bilateral alliances with South Korea and Japan into a broader strategy for addressing common regional and global security challenges. Enhanced trilateralism would augment military deterrence and defense capabilities against common security threats, strengthen unified allied policy positions, and prevent opponents from driving a wedge between allied nations.
- **Create a Trilateral Security Initiative (2+2+2 meeting) to develop joint strategies for addressing common threats and objectives.** Washington should establish an annual meeting of the U.S., South Korean, and Japanese foreign and defense ministers that incorporates the existing U.S.–Japan Security Consultative Committee and U.S.–South Korea Security Consultative Meeting.

Formalizing integrated trilateral security policymaking would encourage development of a joint strategic vision that better incorporates the roles, missions, and capabilities of their militaries.

- **Increase bilateral South Korea–Japan and trilateral South Korea–Japan–U.S. military exercises and maritime security.** The three countries should explore the potential for joint peacekeeping missions, counterterrorism, counterproliferation, counternarcotics, anti-submarine warfare, mine-sweeping, cyberspace protection, and humanitarian assistance and disaster response operations. For example, they could establish joint patrols to combat Somali pirates or conduct mine-sweeping exercises near the Strait of Hormuz.
- **Encourage development of comprehensive trilateral plans for responding to North Korean provocations.** These plans should also include a strategy for Korean unification, including aid and development contributions.
- **Privately urge continued progress toward implementing the GSOMIA and logistics-sharing agreements.** This will require more deft public diplomacy to convince the South Korean public and legislature of the mutual benefits of the accords.
- **Facilitate contact and reconciliation between Seoul and Tokyo, but avoid being drawn into serving as a mediator.** The

U.S. should emphasize achieving mutual objectives by separating current policy issues from contentious historical legacies.

- **Encourage South Korea to deploy a multilayered missile defense system.** This system should be interoperable with a U.S. regional missile network to provide for a more coherent and effective defense of allied military facilities and the South Korean populace. The U.S. should also encourage Seoul to engage in trilateral missile defense cooperation and exercises with the United States and Japan.
- **Retain robust forward-deployed military forces in the Western Pacific.** These forces should be closely integrated with their South Korean and Japanese counterparts. This not only provides for common allied defense, but also would also reassure South Korea against fears of unconstrained resurgent Japanese militarism.

South Korea and Japan, for their part, should:

- **Defuse tensions by affirming that the actions of individuals or nationalist groups do not represent official national policy.** Leaders of both countries should discourage inflammatory propaganda and work to remove distorted portions of school textbooks.
- **Augment official and nongovernment efforts to address and resolve territorial disputes**

27. Victoria Nuland, "Daily Press Briefing," U.S. Department of State, August 23, 2012, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/dpb/2012/08/196881.htm#JAPAN> (accessed September 7, 2012).

and historical issues. In the meantime, Seoul and Tokyo should exercise pragmatic leadership by not allowing emotional nationalism to impede policies that strategically benefit both countries.

- **Precede any announcement on Japan assuming a larger security role with extensive explanations of how the development does not pose a security threat to the region.** South Korea views any Japanese security initiative with great suspicion, whereas Washington has long been exasperated by Japan's strong resistance to expanding its security responsibilities.

Conclusion

Greater multilateral cooperation benefits U.S. interests in Asia by ensuring regional stability, protecting maritime freedom of navigation,

and encouraging the peaceful resolution of disputes. Therefore, Washington needs to exercise leadership by promoting greater military cross-connectivity among its allies and friends to augment traditional "hub and spoke" alliances.

Stronger allied security ties are even more critical in light of growing Asian security threats and U.S. military restructuring. Enhanced allied cooperation can increase America's capacity to deal with regional threats by redistributing military roles and responsibilities among its most capable allies.

The United States, South Korea, and Japan should forge a more robust triangular security structure by strengthening the weak third leg between Seoul and Tokyo. A strong allied security triad could also form a core group for broader regional issues. Given the inherent constraints on improving South Korean-Japanese relations, Washington

should offer assistance, including by incorporating bilateral military initiatives into a broader trilateral relationship with the United States.

Improving South Korean-Japanese military cooperation is one component of a larger effort to improve allied security capabilities. Other elements include implementing ongoing South Korean defense reform plans, enhancing U.S.-South Korean capabilities for responding to North Korean provocations and attacks, encouraging allies to assume larger security roles in the region and globally, and implementing U.S. military realignment plans.

However, there is still no substitute for a robust forward-deployed U.S. military presence as the protector of U.S. interests and guarantor of regional stability.

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