

South Korea's Withdrawal from the Intelligence Sharing Agreement (GSOMIA) with Japan, Opens a Door to New Peace Paradigm in East Asia

By [Jeremiah Kim](#)

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For nearly a century, Japan posed the greatest threat to the security of Korea and most of Asia through its agenda of aggressive militarism and Western-style imperialism; today, that distinction belongs primarily to the United States. Yet the casual newsreader wouldn't know this from the unanimous outcry that has poured out from the military-intelligence establishment in South Korea, Japan, and the United States over the Moon administration's recent decision to withdraw from its intelligence-sharing agreement with Japan, GSOMIA.

According to the experts and talking heads who represent this establishment, South Korea's GSOMIA withdrawal leaves all of East Asia more vulnerable to the real security threat in the region: North Korea, followed closely by China and Russia.

Indeed, Japan and South Korea signed the bilateral agreement in 2016 with the intent to ["streamline intelligence sharing between Seoul and Tokyo in the face of North Korea's nuclear threats."](#) GSOMIA was designed to serve both "practical" and "symbolic" functions: the agreement allowed for the unmitigated sharing of various forms of intelligence — military, satellite, cyber, and human — between Japan and South Korea concerning the activities of North Korea. More importantly, it symbolized the triumph of the U.S.-led alliance with South Korea and Japan to project military and economic power in East Asia against the rising powers of China and Russia.

Embedded into this rationale lie certain hypocrisies both blatant and subtle. A thorough account of U.S. imperialism in Asia in the past half-century would extend beyond the scope of this article, but the pervasive lack of clarity about the current situation among Asian countries themselves reveals certain contradictions worth spelling out.

East Asia: appearance vs. reality

Since its defeat in World War II, the government of Japan has thrown up a white flag of pacification that has won over much of the Western world. In line with its international image and traumatic national experience of nuclear warfare, Japan became a signatory of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty more than 40 years ago. Today, however, Japan implicitly postures to its neighbors as a de facto nuclear state with the [technical capability to produce 5,000 nuclear weapons in six months](#). Meanwhile, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe praises the ["glories" of Japan's past](#), and his glowing praise contains within it a veiled threat to every country Japan invaded and plundered during its colonial era. Nowhere is this threat more apparent than in Japan's aggressive attempts to stake a territorial claim over the island chains of [Dokdo](#) and [Diaoyu](#): for centuries these territories belonged to Korea and China, respectively, only to be seized by Japan in the mid-twentieth century and placed

under a foreign administrative rule that continues to this day.

Within the Korean peninsula, the supposed threat of North Korea has served as a convenient excuse for the continuation in South Korea of [multi-million dollar joint military exercises](#) and unchecked [arms build-up](#) — along with a dizzyingly vast, subterranean “[spy manufacturing machine](#)” that churns out [highly questionable North Korean defector narratives](#) for the sake of acquiring so-called human intelligence to be directly shared with the U.S. and until recently, Japan. Consequently, a national culture of anti-North paranoia pervades the South.

Under the weight of these contradictions, the rationale behind South Korea’s current military and security arrangement has been steadily waning. Despite the resumption of a familiar back-and-forth of joint military exercises on the U.S.-South Korean side and missile tests on the North Korean side, neither the Moon administration nor the DPRK government appears to have lost its long-term resolve in striving for peace and reunification on the peninsula. Japan, meanwhile, has only offered half-baked apologies and recalcitrant chauvinism towards Korea.

And so a stormy trade feud with deep historical roots has brought the relationship between Japan and South Korea to a new low for this century: last year, a South Korean court ruled in favor of [compensation for Korean victims of forced labor](#) by Japanese companies during the era of Japan’s colonial rule. In retaliation, Japan removed South Korea from its list of preferred trading partners and increased restrictions on exported products earlier this month. Incensed South Koreans erupted into a [widespread boycott](#) of Japanese goods, and the Moon administration downgraded Japan’s trade status. Beneath South Korea’s decision to abandon GSOMIA, then, lies a century of simmering anger at the refusal of the Japanese people and their government to fully recognize and make true amends for their imperialistic crimes against humanity.

With the renunciation of its intelligence-sharing pact with Japan, the South Korean government has not only responded to the mandate of the Korean people but dealt a practical and symbolic blow to the status quo in East Asia. As prospects for peace between North and South Korea loom closer than they have since the Korean War, the widening rift between South Korea and Japan has opened a door of opportunity for a new peace paradigm to be created in the region.

Ultimately, the termination of GSOMIA does not so much reflect the failure of inter-Asian diplomacy as it does the inefficacy of the U.S. alliance structure in East Asia. As American power dwindles in the Asia Pacific, the possibility of multilateral cooperation among the Asian countries increases. A regime built on the dominance of a foreign superpower can be replaced with a regional or continental system based on mutual relationships. Such a system would not emerge by chance or fate, but rather by the political will of the people involved. It is easy to talk of government officials and newsroom personalities when it comes to matters of international import, but the more important question is whether the people of a country want peace — for it is they who can decide whether peace is won.

The panic in Washington

Predictably, any forecast of peace appears as a threat to those who hold a stake in maintaining a climate of war. Perusing the lines of mainstream news reports and analyses on the recent GSOMIA decision proves highly instructive in this regard, insofar as these lines

reveal the panic and dismay among the Washington elite at the thought of South Korea breaking up a military bloc that the United States has taken such pains to build over the past 75 years.

A prime example can be found in Bruce Bennett, a senior defense analyst at the RAND Corporation. In an [interview](#) with Yonhap News Agency, Bennett opined: “In the event of a conflict with the North, the U.S. would deploy forces in support of its South Korean ally, but some of those troops would need to arrive via airports in Japan... South Korea’s decision to terminate GSOMIA reflects a failure of the South Korean government to recognize the importance of Japanese support to South Korean security.” In [another interview](#) with Voice of America, Bennett estimated that a conflict with North Korea would require the U.S. to bring about 690,000 troops to the peninsula — 662,000 more than the 28,000 U.S. troops currently stationed in Korea. Terminating GSOMIA would “significantly slow the ability of U.S. forces to get to Korea” through Japanese airbases.

Perhaps unwittingly, Bennett paints a horrifying picture: a full-sized army of American soldiers flying halfway across the world to attack Korea from Japan.

Bennett’s employer RAND is a U.S. government-funded think tank whose tendrils have spread far and deep into [every aspect of U.S. military and intelligence strategy](#) since the Cold War, making Bennett a reliable mouthpiece for the [permanent-war complex](#) in Washington. The key detail to notice in Bennett’s opinion on the South Korea-Japan situation is that he presupposes a conflict between North and South Korea. In a delicate act of subliminal messaging, he slips in the mental image of war with North Korea as a given assumption from which all other reasoning must proceed.

The military-intelligence elites in Washington need lawmakers and everyday citizens to believe that a possible peace between the two Koreas should not be factored into any sort of decision-making when it comes to South Korea’s national security strategy or U.S. military involvement in Korea. Crucially, however, the Trump administration does not always align with the agenda of permanent war, especially when it comes to Korea.

In scores of news reports, opinion columns, and interviews, President Trump has been held wholly or partially guilty for the Moon administration’s most recent drastic course of action. Analysts have been quick to denounce Trump for botching trilateral relations between the U.S., South Korea, and Japan due to a bevy of accused missteps: his [reluctance to step between the latter two nations](#) to paternalistically resolve their issues with one another, his [awareness of the hypocrisy](#) in condemning North Korea for testing missiles when other countries do the same, and his [personal crusade](#) to reduce U.S. troop involvement and monetary support toward military “readiness” operations in South Korea that signal a flagrant threat of war to the North.

Whether Trump has consciously willed it or no, what is clear is that his administration’s political and rhetorical stances towards Korea have precipitated a seismic shift in the balance of power in East Asia — a fact which has drawn the ire of those who cling onto the outdated idea that the world needs the United States to maintain the global order because the smaller, darker nations cannot govern themselves.

In an [interview](#) on KBS World Radio, James Brown, a professor at Temple University’s Japan campus, ventured that a change in administration in the United States might “make a difference” in trying to “promote cooperation between the two sides and get them to

overcome their differences” — an area where Trump has evidently failed. A Democratic president might, in other words, reverse the spiraling disarray of the U.S. alliance in East Asia. If Trump is unseated in the 2020 elections, pro-war factions can likely anticipate a more conventional U.S. military strategy akin to former President Obama’s disastrous [“pivot to Asia”](#).

For those of us in the United States who care about peace and believe that the universal right to self-rule means that other peoples should exercise responsibility for their nation’s path without requiring the blessing of the West, the upcoming presidential election presents an opportunity to put, as the saying goes, our money where our mouth is. Will we elect a president who stands for persistent wars? Or will we elect a president who can help open the door to peace? Will we do what we can to hasten the arrival of a new paradigm in East Asia? Or will we bow before the so-called experts who tell us that further militarization is best for “America’s interests” or that somebody else “needs” America’s help?

It is not necessary to fully agree with or condone the governments of North Korea, China, and Russia. It is right, however, to practice some basic self-awareness about the gaping contradictions in our own society’s use of wholesale violence and extortion against not one, but multiple continents of human beings. As a famous Jewish rabbi once said, “You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother’s eye.”

The military-intelligence establishment has decried South Korea’s refusal to cooperate with a country that will not recognize the persistence of its own evils, and hawkish trumpeters are sounding the horns of war and mayhem — but a great many others will be sounding the bells of peace and justice in the days to come.

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***Jeremiah Kim** is a graduate of Cornell University, a member of Asian Pacific Americans for Action (APAA), and a former editor at The Cornell Daily Sun.*

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