

Military Alliances Aiming for Another “NATO” in East Asia

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On 13 June, South Korean Foreign Minister Park Jin expressed his hope of normalizing the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) between his country and Japan at a joint press conference with the US top diplomat Antony Blinken. [1]

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The GSOMIA is the first bilateral military intelligence-sharing agreement concluded between Japan and South Korea in November 2016. It was maintained in an unstable manner under former South Korean President Moon Jae-in. In 2019, Moon Jae-in expressed his decision to scrap the GSOMIA as retaliation against Japan’s restricted export of high-tech materials caused. The tensions between the two countries were created by various historical grievances concerning Japan’s past occupation of the Korean peninsula. But soon after that, Moon Jae-in temporarily extended the GSOMIA reversing his earlier decision. [2]

The GSOMIA symbolizes the normalization of diplomatic relations without the recognition of colonial rule by Japan, and the contradictions of the US-Japan and US-South Korea alliances caused by past colonial rule. The US established the alliances to block the Soviet Union in Northeast Asia by the conclusion of the Treaty of San Francisco in 1951 followed by the Treaty on Basic Relations between Japan and South Korea in 1965. And after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the alliances have been maintained changing their purpose to “blocking of China”. In the process, several North Korean nuclear and ballistic missile tests have been conducted. While the multilateral alliances are maintained, the nature of the ethno-nationalist North Korean regime may be a factor fueling continuing escalation in the ceasefire area. Past South Korean Presidents since 1965, including former President Moon Jae-in, did not face the fundamental contradictions of the military alliances formed in 1951 and 1965.

In recent years, the alliances have remained closely linked to the US’s “blocking of China” strategy and Japan’s “war-capable nation” strategy. The alliances have not only contributed to strengthening the role of the United Nations Command (UNC) but also reduced US military costs to make preparations for an “East Asian NATO” that blocks China by utilizing the multilateral military system: UN Army. Meanwhile, the political conflicts between Japan and South Korea at the government level remain unsolved. And they sometimes constitute obstacles to appeal to popular mobilizations of solidarity in the area.

Strong opposition to GSOMIA

Since 2010, South Korea has been in secret negotiations to conclude the GSOMIA under the Lee Myung-bak administration. And in June 2012, just before the conclusion of the treaty on the agreement, strong opposition raged in South Korea. As a result, South Korea requested Japan to postpone the conclusion of the treaty. The postponed treaty was signed privately at the Korean Ministry of National Defense in Seoul in November 2016, with the approval of then-President Park Geun-hye. However, even after that, the conflict between South Korea and Japan reached its peak due to historical issues between the two countries such as inappropriate compensation for former comfort women and compensations for the families of South Koreans who were unfairly treated and illegally forced to supply labor during the Second World War.

The two countries' relations declined in late 2018, after Supreme Court of South Korea and other courts made rulings which ordered several Japanese companies to make compensations to the bereaved families. Under the situation, Japan-South Korea radar lock-on dispute was followed by a large political dispute between Japan and South Korea. [3] And South Korea decided to terminate the GSOMIA as retaliation against Japan's restricted export of high-tech materials and to remove South Korea from its export "whitelist". But after three month, South Korea reversed its decision to continue the agreement. As a result, the agreement was only temporarily terminated.

Incurred contradictions of 1951 and 1965 and South Korean Supreme Court rulings

Different historical perspectives have caused chronic conflicts for many years between the Japan and South Korea. With the political dispute left unattended, South Korean President Yun Seok-yeol who took office in May, is trying to revive the GSOMIA. The root causes of the conflicts lie in the Treaty of San Francisco signed in 1951 and then the Treaty on Basic Relations signed in 1965. In 2018, South Korean Supreme Court accepted the illegality of past Japanese colonial rule. But Japan claims that the right to claim damages was lost under a 1965 claims settlement agreement signed alongside the Treaty on Basic Relations normalizing ties between the two countries. The Treaty of San Francisco is the root of the Treaty on Basic Relations, which the Japanese government has used as a prior justification for colonial rule over the Korean Peninsula in the past. The Treaty of San Francisco, signed in 1951, was a treaty between Japan and the Allies of World War II, including the US. Under the treaty, Japan was solely responsible for World War II and granted an exemption for colonial rule over the Korean Peninsula. The Korean Peninsula was not annexed by colonial rule, but was "legally annexed and separated again and became independent" by Japan.

And when the treaty was signed, the South Korean government, a victim of colonial rule, was not allowed to attend the meeting. As a result, South Korea was deprived of the right to claim colonial responsibility and compensation against Japan. The Treaty on Basic Relations, which was signed under the Park Chung-hee administration after the Treaty of San Francisco, also did not clearly define Japanese colonial rule. The Treaty on Basic Relations does not state Japanese colonial rule, and the annex treaty does not specify compensation for Japanese colonial rule. The contradiction in the Treaty on Basic Relations of 1965 due to the problems in the Treaty of San Francisco of 1951 has created the political conflict between Japan and South Korea today. And in 2018, the contradictions of 1951 and 1965 clashed with the South Korea's Supreme Court ruling on Japan's postwar compensation filed by the victims of Japanese imperial colonial rule. The clash was also the result of solidarity between the victims of colonial rule and the South Korean population.

Pro-capital policies of Moon Jae-in administration

In the past, the “democratic” former President Moon Jae-in, inaugurated after the candle light “revolution”, also did not face the fundamental contradictions of the US-led alliances of 1951 and 1965. He failed to establish equitable partnership with the victims of colonial rule the South Korean population and did not consider them to be equal in solidarity. Amid intensifying tensions in the Korean Peninsula and Northeast Asia under the US-China hegemony, Moon Jae-in temporarily declared termination of the GSOMIA. But he did not want to dispose of the US-Japan and US-South Korea alliances. And he sought nationalism in South Korea under the pretext of national interests and provoked economic retaliation against Japan, while imposing pro-capital policies such as extended working hours. He merely used the GSOMIA as a diplomatic card against Japan’s economic retaliation with his pro-capital policies. Then the bilateral military intelligence-sharing pact was maintained in an unstable manner under the administration.

Moon Jae-in’s mediation proposal for South Korea’s Supreme Court ruling on Japan’s postwar compensation in 2018 did not presuppose Japan’s colonial rule. It was a major setback for the outcome of the relative Korean popular movement. And the next President Yun Seok-yeol has returned to the close US-Korea alliance in a joint statement after President Joseph Biden’s visit to Korea in June this year. [4] He also aims for normalization of the GSOMIA and also do not face the fundamental contradictions of multilateral alliances.

To break up the US-Japan and US-South Korea alliances

The fundamental contradictions of the multilateral military alliances formed in 1951 and 1965 were visualized by the victims of past Japanese colonial rule and the South Korean population in solidarity with them. The contradictions created by US-led non-peaceful and non-democratic alliances had left the victims of colonial anti-humanitarian torts behind. And the Supreme Court ruling on Japan’s postwar compensation in 2018 was achieved by the people’s struggle since the 1990s for comfort women and South Koreans who were unfairly treated and illegally forced to supply labor for the Second World War.

The conflict between Japan and South Korea is a visualized crack caused by the US-led multilateral alliances which ignored past Japanese colonial rule. And the pro-capital policy aimed at South Korean workers was promoted in the context of the “war-able nationalization” of the right wing of Japan linked to the “global comprehensive strategic alliance” led by the United States and the nationalism policy led by the South Korean government. Then maintenance of the US-Japan and US-South Korea alliances for blocking of China and the US-led alliance enhancement strategy were promoted at the same time. Therefore, in order to resolve the conflict between Japan and South Korea today, we must go beyond the bilateral issues of Japan and South Korea and look at it from the perspective of Northeast Asia as a third country.

Against the backdrop of NATO and other overwhelmingly dominant forces in the world, the US is enthusiastic about building an “East Asian NATO” as part of the expansion of its territory since the 19th century. [5] And the US-led alliances from their beginning have been designed to tie East Asian countries to diplomatic, military and political leadership of the US. Also, the US and some Asian countries were involved in suppressing anti-colonial mobilization.

Tensions and political instability in the East Asia/Asia-Pacific area are also related to the continued escalation in Ukraine. We must shatter the non-peaceful and non-popular cracked alliances which have been fueled the vicious spiral of militarization and nuclear escalation in the areas. To that end,

the Mutual Defense Treaty between the United States and the Republic of Korea that brought about continued stationing of the United States Forces Korea (USFK) in South Korea should be abolished. And GSOMIA, which is the core of the US-Japan and US-South Korea alliances, must also be abolished. To clean up the contradictions of the US-Japan and US-South Korea alliances, we must aim to achieve the following: closure of all the US military bases in East Asia, withdrawal of foreign forces and maintenance of the military neutrality, complete dissolution of the US-Japan and US-South Korea alliances, establishment of a nuclear free zone in East Asia to block the spiral of tensions and escalation, elimination of the nationalist hysteria that sticks reactionary forces together, and building international solidarity by self-determination. They are missions of revolutionary, pacifist, and democratic forces in the area.

Karen Yamanaka

Footnotes

[1] U.S. Department of State, 13 June 2022, [“Secretary Antony J. Blinken And Republic of Korea Foreign Minister Park Jin At a Joint Press Availability”](#).

[2] The agreement is automatically renewed unless either of countries terminates it.

[3] The dispute, which occurred in December 2018, was caused by an incident between a Japanese aircraft of the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force (JMSDF) and a South Korean vessel of the Republic of Korea Navy (ROKN). No weapons were used from either side, but the incident caused a large diplomatic dispute between Japan and South Korea.

[4] President Joseph Biden met with top conglomerates Samsung and Hyundai (known in South Korea as chaebol) during his visit to South Korea in June this year. It is unusual for the US president to meet individually with the top executives of a foreign company when traveling abroad.

[5] On June 29, Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida and South Korean President Yun Seok-yeol joined the 2022 NATO Madrid summit for the first time. The two-day summit adopted a new strategic concept that mentioned China for the first time. NATO invited the leaders of the countries, which the organization views as its “Asia-Pacific partner countries”. It was also an unprecedented move.