



## RESETTING TIES BETWEEN JAPAN AND SOUTH KOREA AFTER THE GSOMIA EXTENSION

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The South Korean government's decision to suspend termination of its intelligence sharing pact (the General Security of Military Information Agreement, or GSOMIA) with Japan has given the two countries time to end their diplomatic impasse. The process leading to the ROK government's decision was marked by mounting US pressure on the Moon Jae-in administration from high-ranking officials, including Secretary of Defense Mark Esper, who [expressed disappointment](#) with the deteriorating relationship between the two Northeast Asian allies.

The Japan-ROK relationship needs to be mended – and quickly. The conditional suspension of GSOMIA termination does not mean this process will be smoother or easier. For example, a top South Korean official accused Japan of distorting facts of the closed-door negotiations to reflect better on Tokyo, a charge that [Japan denied](#). These tensions reflect the deeply intertwined nature of the two states' policies toward each other and domestic politics, and the lower priority given to mutually beneficial cooperation. Both countries need a face-saving compromise that will allow them to achieve strategic goals. Specifically, the two countries need to acknowledge the importance of GSOMIA, focus on countering the North Korea threat by enhancing the sanctions regime,

and transform their bilateral relations in the context of Northeast Asian security.

First, both countries need to reconfirm the strategic value of GSOMIA. The Moon administration has downplayed the importance of the agreement, claiming that its termination will not compromise security on the Korean Peninsula. ROK Minister of Defense Jeong Kyeong-doo said that information sharing is not carried out in real-time but is facilitated after a security threat has materialized and that rarely has information actually been exchanged. South Korea's Blue House noted that intelligence can still be shared with Japan through the Trilateral Information Sharing Agreement (TISA), which was the main mechanism for information exchange prior to agreeing to GSOMIA in 2016.

However, TISA is not a suitable substitute for GSOMIA. It is slow, as information is passed via the US rather than directly, and uncertain, as it is used on a case by case basis, whereas GSOMIA allows the two countries to exchange information when one side requests it. More importantly, the Moon administration's downplaying of GSOMIA overlooks the fact that the agreement is an important pillar of trilateral security cooperation, which is aimed at balancing China's growing influence and deterring North Korea's security provocations. The agreement is taking on increasing importance as North Korea's self-imposed yearend deadline for progress on US-DPRK dialogue is looming and, with little headway, the region needs to brace for North Korea's military escalation.

Second, the two countries need to find common ground to work together to enhance the international sanctions regime against North Korea. The [policy dialogue](#) between the two countries' authorities, held for the first time in more than three years, was a good starting point. Through this dialogue, the two countries can exchange information and ideas to ratchet up export controls relating to regional security. Information sharing on North Korea's attempts to avoid economic sanctions imposed by the United Nations Security Council can strengthen export controls and keep economic sanctions from loosening in ways that help North Korea.

In this process, the objective is to prevent North Korea from sidestepping sanctions, but both countries need to appreciate how the issue is linked to domestic politics. Japanese have concerns about lax export controls, while South Koreans argue that Japan is weaponizing trade as retaliation for South Korean demands for war reparations. The two countries could begin with talks on confidence building measures, but that is not the ultimate end. Both countries need to develop and transform a policy dialogue from a troubleshooting exercise to a policy coordinating mechanism. South Korea should find ways to raise its credibility with Japan and Tokyo should define criteria and set a timeline for removing the current policy that approves the export of three raw materials on the basis of individual screening (rather than advanced approval).

Third, the two countries should redefine their bilateral relationship in the context of Northeast Asian security. Once countries like Russia and China see a split between Tokyo and Seoul, they promptly [try to deepen the divide](#), even if it means resorting to militarily provocative actions. Demonstrating the political will to sustain bilateral security cooperation will help maintain regional stability. The two countries also need to discuss the future of deterrence in the region given the end of the Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces (INF) treaty, which opens the door for the United States to [deploy such missiles in Asia](#) (an objective that Esper has already spoken favorably about). As allies of the US, both countries should actively engage in outlining and shaping a strategic vision in Northeast Asia. The necessity of strengthening bilateral ties is compounded by North Korea's claims that it will seek a 'new path' if talks with the US end in failure. While it is unclear what the new path involves, recent moves such as North Korea's first strategic dialogue with Russia and frequent China-DPRK summits suggest that security cooperation among US allies should be strengthened, not weakened.

Ultimately, the two countries need each other to face bigger threats in the region. Although the bilateral foreign ministers' meeting following South Korea's suspension of GSOMIA termination secured time to mend relations, resolving disputes over GSOMIA and

trade are temporary damage-control measures. The two countries must address deep-rooted issues such as wartime reparations, historical, and territorial conflicts so that relations can grow more stable and become immune to domestic politics. Talks should be constructive and forward-looking, and this will require political patience by both governments. Fortunately, the two countries have numerous opportunities to build good faith, from the high-level trade policy dialogue in Tokyo, the Asia-Europe meeting (ASEM) in Madrid, and a bilateral summit on the sidelines of the China-Japan-South Korea trilateral summit in Chengdu. Both countries should not miss the chance to repair and strengthen the relationship.

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