

“GSOMIA VS. TISA: WHAT IS THE BIG DEAL?”

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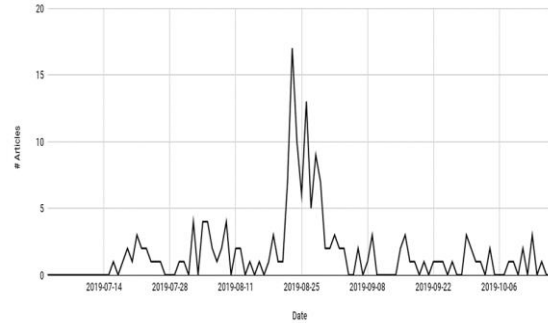
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Introduction

South Korea’s announcement to end the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) with Japan on August 22 marks the lowest of bilateral relations. Following the decision, Japan’s removal of South Korea (Republic of Korea, or ROK) from its whitelist of preferred trading partners took effect on August 28, for the first time since 2004. ROK also officially ousted Japan from its whitelist on September 18, signaling unyielding bilateral tensions.

While the United States (U.S.) has been encouraging ROK to reconsider its decision before the GSOMIA formally expires in November, prospects are grim. For instance, after North Korea launched ballistic missiles on September 10, the two countries did not utilize GSOMIA to share military intelligence. International media publicity regarding the potential termination of GSOMIA has also been gaining increasingly less public traction with time (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Number of Newspaper Articles on GSOMIA (in English, from July 1 - October 16, 2019)



In weighing the benefits and costs of GSOMIA, many experts and scholars turn to the Trilateral Intelligence Sharing Arrangement (TISA) as its substitute. TISA, signed in late December 2014, enables both Japan and South Korea to access military information on North Korea through the U.S. Meanwhile, GSOMIA—the first military agreement between Japan and ROK since 1945—was signed in November 2016 to allow the two nations to directly exchange military intelligence. Since GSOMIA, “TISA has not been activated very much.”

The question, then, is whether TISA could serve as an adequate alternative for GSOMIA. The next sections provide a brief overview of both Japanese and South Korean perspectives on the issue in reference to the conference proceedings at the U.S.-ROK-Japan Trilateral Dialogue in Maui (hosted by Pacific Forum) in September.

Japan’s Perspective: Operational Significance of GSOMIA: Is Military Intelligence Cooperation with ROK Really Necessary?

The view of GSOMIA’s operational value varies among Japanese intellectuals. Proponents support the extension of GSOMIA pointing the importance of comprehensive intelligence collection. For example, in the case of North Korea’s missile launch, ROK is in a better position to attain more accurate data of the boost phase in addition to detect signs of a launch from suspicious activities of personnel and vehicles. Furthermore, HUMINT collected by ROK claimed to be valuable by some government

officials and experts. These types of information combined with U.S. intelligence such as gathered by Early Warning Radar will supplement each other and enable extensive and multifaceted analysis on DPRK's military activities.

On the other hand, some experts question the value of GSOMIA arguing the alternative use of TISA and the superiority of Japanese intelligence capability. Japan currently has seven ISR satellites in operation, six Aegis BMD-capable vessels and four ground-based radars in addition to maritime patrol aircrafts and Airborne Warning and Control System aircraft. Some claim Japan has sufficient intelligence capabilities without relying on information from ROK which possesses much fewer equipment and assets related to intelligence collection activities. Moreover, some argue Japan could achieve necessary information exchange through TISA instead of GSOMIA.

However, intelligence analysis based on information obtained only by Japan and the U.S. might overlook some important observables and fail to attain comprehensive picture. Also, as discussed in the section above, TISA cannot ensure timely and comprehensive intelligence sharing like GSOMIA. Thus, even though Japan has better ISR capability and TISA will partially facilitate information sharing with ROK, comprehensive intelligence sharing under GSOMIA is an effective countermeasure for Japanese government to address new regional challenges not only limited to the DPRK's missiles and nuclear programs but also including the threats from China and Russia.

**South Korea's Perspective:
90-Day Window Until the Final Deadline:
Time Won, or Time Lost for South Korea?**

The domestic political divide is reflected in the way South Korean officials and intellectuals evaluate GSOMIA, its military value and strategic implications. Those who stand in favor of the Moon administration's decision to end GSOMIA view it as a diplomatic card against Japan amidst continued bilateral trade disputes. They advocate

ROK's maintenance of "strategic ambiguity" throughout the 90-day window between the government's announcement to end GSOMIA in August and the deadline to renew it in November. By neither confirming nor denying its withdrawal from GSOMIA, proponents believe that ROK can utilize the time to effectively weigh its costs and benefits.

With regard to GSOMIA's military significance, advocates of the government decision claim that TISA is a valid alternative as an intelligence-sharing mechanism between Japan and ROK. They argue that TISA is reliable since it had been utilized in the past prior to the enactment of GSOMIA, and because "the [same] level of confidential military information" is shared by TISA and GSOMIA. More active supporters consider GSOMIA as a biased agreement since it provides Tokyo easier access to Seoul's information on early detection of North Korean missile and nuclear threats. By splitting the U.S.-Japan-ROK trilateral alliance into two individual and competitive hubs-and-spokes, they suggest that Washington's strong encouragement toward the renewal of GSOMIA may raise Seoul's suspicion of its impartiality in addressing the two regional allies.

Perhaps the Moon administration's announcement to withdraw from GSOMIA and its maintenance of "strategic ambiguity" throughout the three-month window following it are more strategically driven than they may seem. According to a survey conducted in late August, 54.9 percent of the South Korean public supported the decision end GSOMIA, showing a 7.9 percent point increase since earlier survey results. From the respondents, only 38.4 percent opposed the government decision. With continued Japanese boycotts in South Korea, public support is increasingly shifting towards GSOMIA's termination.

However, time itself is a double-edged sword. While the administration has bought time to waver between renewal of and withdrawal from GSOMIA, prospects for reconciliation with Japan have further dimmed. As the deadline to renew

the agreement approaches, ROK will have to arrive at a decision that will have lasting consequences on the U.S.-Japan-ROK trilateral alliance. In addition, time will be paid later if ROK decides not to renew GSOMIA. TISA will slow down the intelligence-sharing process for both Japan and the ROK with the U.S. as an intermediary source of information. Most importantly, once terminated, it may take decades before an agreement such as GSOMIA is re-enacted between the two countries.

Conclusion: GSOMIA vs. TISA

Overall, while TISA may function as a substitute to GSOMIA, it is more likely to hinder swift intelligence exchange and effective coordination for three reasons.

First, unlike GSOMIA, information sharing under TISA is limited to North Korea's nuclear and missile activities. This limited focus weakens both Japan and ROK's capabilities in addressing new regional challenges, such as North Korea's SLBM. For instance, on October 2, DPRK launched the Pukguksong-3 into Japan's exclusive economic zone.

Secondly, TISA provides lower intelligence confidentiality than GSOMIA. Under GSOMIA, Japan and ROK exchange information that is both confidential and legally binding. In contrast, under TISA, either Japan or ROK can reject the counterpart's request for military intelligence if it detects the risk of information leakage. The issue of confidentiality, then, inevitably influences the two nations' willingness to share information and especially valuable information.

Finally, information sharing between Japan and ROK through TISA will be operationally inefficient due to delays in information exchange. GSOMIA reduces this operational cost and facilitates swift coordination in intelligence gathering amongst the U.S.-Japan-ROK trilateral alliance.

During the U.S.-ROK-Japan Trilateral Dialogue in Maui, both South Korean and Japanese representatives—regardless of their respective political standing—either indirectly or directly suggested the need for continued bilateral cooperation. For instance, many South Korean

participants inferred that the government would renew GSOMIA in so far as Japan initiates the reconciliation process. Japanese participants also showed willingness to share classified information with ROK through GSOMIA prior to receiving a formal request from Seoul.

Hence, what is necessary for the two parties at this time is mutual dialogue, which has been hindered by respective national pride. Deterrence against regional security threats require a cooperative effort based on a stable U.S.-Japan-ROK trilateral alliance; the termination of GSOMIA should be reconsidered before it is too late to nullify the decision.

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