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Japan-South Korea Military Cooperation: Implications for Northeast Asia

By Sarah Teo

Synopsis

South Korea is expected to sign the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) with Japan once its National Assembly has been briefed on the pact. Despite their historical animosity, the potentially closer defence ties between Japan and South Korea may lead to more progress in inter-state relations in Northeast Asia.

Commentary

South Korea has again postponed the signing of the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) with Japan, but a presidential spokesman has indicated that the pact will be sealed once the National Assembly has been briefed on the details. When signed, the first-of-its-kind agreement will see the two nations exchanging information on North Korea's nuclear and missile programs, as well as on China's military rise.

The announcement of the GSOMIA signing has aroused a flurry of anti-Japanese sentiments among South Koreans, highlighting deep-seated mistrust of the nation's former coloniser. The secrecy which previously shrouded discussions regarding the GSOMIA suggests that the South Korean leadership might have wanted to circumvent potential domestic opposition to the deal. Amid calls to scrap the GSOMIA, however, President Lee Myung-bak has said that the pact would benefit the country.

Implications of Japan-South Korea military cooperation

Against the background of US re-deployment in the region, the potentially closer defence ties between the two US allies could have significant implications for Northeast Asia. The signing of the GSOMIA could lead to further progress in relations in the region, based on the following considerations.

First, Japan-South Korea military cooperation will move US relations with its Northeast Asian allies beyond the traditional 'hub and spokes' structure. Instead of the US 'hub' linking the Japan and South Korea 'spokes,' the latter will be able to share relatively sensitive information directly with each other. This does not mean a decrease in US regional influence. If anything, US presence in the region is likely to strengthen since its two allies are now cooperating in dealing with regional security issues. There may also be more trilateral military drills, like the recent two-day naval exercise held in June, in waters off the southern coast of the Korean peninsula.

Second, the signing of the GSOMIA may signal that practical considerations rule in the foreign policies of Northeast Asian states. Despite their historical animosity, Japan and South Korea are ultimately motivated by common realpolitik concerns. For instance, both countries may need to share resources to manage North Korea's aggressive stance. This pragmatism may extend over wider Northeast Asian cooperation, such as among China, Japan and South Korea when their joint action is needed to respond to immediate threats.

Third, China's response to the pact will determine the future direction of trilateral cooperation between the three Northeast Asian countries. While China has yet to officially object to the Japan-South Korea pact, the pro-government Global Times has warned that the agreement could upset China-South Korea ties. Should China feel left out and perceive the GSOMIA as a US-driven move to contain its rise, that may make it more wary of participating in regional forums. However, if China were to view this development as a positive one for regional cooperation, then the momentum for platforms such as the Northeast Asia Trilateral Summit may be boosted.

Fourth, a joint Japan-South Korea stance on North Korea could put pressure on the Kim regime to return to the Six Party Talks. While North Korea has denounced Seoul for "selling the [Korean] nation out" by cooperating militarily with Japan, in the long-run it could be persuaded to resume its place at the negotiating table if South Korea and Japan present a consistently united front on the nuclear issue.

Historical baggage

However, the potential benefits of Japan-South Korea military cooperation are unlikely to be realised if both countries do not satisfactorily manage their historical legacy's pervasive influence. Issues involving South Korean 'comfort women' during World War II, Japan's potential to remilitarise, and the Dokdo/Takeshima islets, remain unresolved.

South Korea has often insisted that the 'comfort women' issue must be resolved – in the form of an official apology and compensation from Japan – before bilateral relations can progress. The controversy over Japan-South Korea military cooperation arises in part because Japan has yet to make satisfactory gestures to the South Korean women who were forced to service Japanese troops during World War II. South Korea's signing of the GSOMIA is thus seen as a betrayal of Korean interests.

South Korea and its neighbours are also wary that Japan may remilitarise and reclaim its former dominance over the region. Unpleasant memories in South Korea of Japan's past colonisation reinforce concern over bilateral defence cooperation. It is perceived that sharing classified data on South Korea's military capabilities could be disadvantageous to it in the event of a conflict with Japan.

The territorial dispute over the Dokdo/Takeshima islets in the Sea of Japan, which both claim but are controlled by South Korea, has dogged Japan-South Korea relations. Should tensions over the disputed territory worsen, it could inflame public opinion against military cooperation and negate the potential progress in defence ties. It remains to be seen if military cooperation, like economic relations, can overcome the hostility emanating from history.

Whither Japan-South Korea military cooperation?

If it goes through, the GSOMIA could frame a new context for the conduct of relations in Northeast Asia. As of now, historical animosity between Japan and South Korea seem to make uncertain the future of the GSOMIA. Also, South Korea's year-end presidential election may see a new leadership less friendly to Japan, which could undermine any progress made in bilateral relations.

Despite the current domestic opposition in South Korea to the GSOMIA, it is expected to be signed once the pact has been presented to South Korea's National Assembly. In the long-term, closer defence relations between Japan and South Korea will be necessary to deal with common threats. The form this cooperation will eventually take depends largely on domestic support and the political will of both sides.

Sarah Teo is Senior Analyst with the Multilateralism and Regionalism Programme. S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University.