



## **East Asia's Fragile Security Environment and the Propagation of Insecurity**

### **A Negative Showcase**

**Dr Oliver Corff**

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#### **Executive Summary**

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Any multilateral or collective security architecture requires a minimum of common ground and mutual trust between the participating nations in order to benefit from such an arrangement. This holds especially valid under a looming power vacuum lest that vacuum be occupied by a third party. In the potential absence of a strong leadership by the United States, any proactive approach by a regional power with a commitment to common values should not be regarded with mistrust. Against this backdrop, the survival of the GSOMIA agreement between the Republic of Korea (hereinafter: ROK, or South Korea) and Japan is the litmus test for the strength and robustness of the security environment of advanced democracies in East Asia.

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## Analysis

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### Introduction

In greater East Asia, there is no such thing as a collective security architecture in analogy to NATO. Even though attempts to this effect were made when the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) was founded in 1954, the effort proved unsuccessful and SEATO was dissolved in 1977. Anyway, South Korea and Japan had never been members of SEATO; their respective security has been and is, to this very day, fundamentally enabled by mutual security treaties with the United States. The *Mutual Defense Treaty between the United States and the Republic of Korea* was signed in 1953, two months after the Korean Armistice Agreement which ended fighting in the Korean War. The *Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security Between the United States and Japan* was signed in 1960, it continued and broadened the spirit of the *Security Treaty Between the United States and Japan* signed in 1951. The guiding principles of these treaties are very much the same that govern the NATO treaty, up to identical wording and enumeration of individual articles. Despite the strong bilateral ties of South Korea and Japan with the United States (and the equally strong reliance of South Korea and Japan on the United States in all matters related to defence with regard to major regional threats) there is no genuine trilateral or multilateral collective security arrangement which includes South Korea and Japan as parties on equal footing, despite a number of existing collective defence mechanisms on a working level. In short, from a regional perspective, the partnership of South Korea and Japan with the United States can be described as a hub and spoke system where the United States form the common hub.

With the current US administration signalling eroding support and their creeping withdrawal from the hub and spoke arrangement of bilateral security alliances with South Korea and Japan, a power vacuum emerges which attracts actors with an inclination towards strongman behaviour, favoured by a security environment between South Korea and Japan which is fragile to the degree that it risks harming the legitimate interests of all parties concerned (in this case, including the United States).

### **GSOMIA: The General Security of Military Information Agreement between South Korea and Japan**

North Korea, governed by a hereditary dictatorship, technically still at war with South Korea, Japan and the United States, has the intent to “reunite” the Korean peninsula under North Korean rule, develops ballistic missiles, claims to be a nuclear power and is known for its ongoing and persistent violation of human rights, as well as its generally hostile attitude towards and disdain of international institutions and the rule of law. With regard to this shared threat, South Korea and Japan, supported by the United States, decided around two decades ago to share their respective unique intelligence assets. From a Korean perspective, Japan has superior signals intelligence (notably with regard to missile defence<sup>1</sup> and sea surveillance), while, from a Japanese perspective, South Korea has unique access to human intelligence. Sharing this intelligence requires an agreement between and commitment by the signatory parties that information is protected, sources are not compromised and involved personnel is limited to the necessary minimum on a need to know basis. After

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<sup>1</sup> See the following overview of North Korea's ballistic missile program by the MoD of Japan: „Recent Missile & Nuclear Development of North Korea“. November 2019, Japan Ministry of Defense. [https://www.mod.go.jp/e/d\\_act/sec\\_env/pdf/dprk\\_d-act\\_2020\\_e\\_a.pdf](https://www.mod.go.jp/e/d_act/sec_env/pdf/dprk_d-act_2020_e_a.pdf) (last visited May 4, 2020).



decades of complicated negotiations between the two states, such an agreement was finally signed as the 2016 Defense White Paper, issued by the Ministry of National Defense of the Republic of Korea, stated:

In November 2016, the ROK-Japan General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) was concluded to effectively deter North Korean nuclear and missile threats by utilizing Japanese intelligence capabilities to enhance the ROK's security benefits.<sup>2</sup>

In order to sign the GSOMIA agreement, South Korea had to circumnavigate a number of political and historical roadblocks while facing pressure from a strong domestic anti-US and anti-Japanese sentiment. Several times, a signature of the agreement was cancelled at last notice, and in November 2019, after half a year of acrimonious animosities resulting in a trade war, the agreement was finally renewed, yet only after strong persuasion by the United States.

### **South Korea at a Crossroads**

Besides struggling with domestic opposition when negotiating the GSOMIA agreement, South Korea had to deal with open and covert interference from China on a number of different issues all related to South Korea's security and U.S. alliance. China strongly objects to the deployment of the U.S. THAAD missile defense system, claiming it violates China's security interests. While never officially sanctioning South Korea, China effectively made use of the strong economic ties between the two countries and the resulting South Korean dependencies. The major South Korean conglomerate Lotte was barred from doing business through its existing outlets in China for about two years for the simple fact that it had provided the land for the deployment of the THAAD system. As soon as the then newly elected president Moon Jae-in suspended further THAAD deployment in 2017, relations with China normalized quickly. Two years later, during the Sino-Korean Summit in December 23, 2019, Moon Jae-in stated that the plight of the Uighur minority in China and the Hong Kong issue were China's domestic affairs, while at the same time denouncing U.S.-style unilateralism and protectionism and expressing an interest in China's Belt and Road Initiative. This unexpected South Korean rapprochement, if not to say near total surrender to China, notwithstanding the alliance with the US, led the former Director of Military Intelligence of Japan's MoD, Ōta Fumio, to question whether South Korea still is a US ally.<sup>3</sup> To borrow a term from a recent paper by Henry Farrell and A. L. Newman, China excels at weaponizing interdependence<sup>4</sup> for pressuring Korea into actions with regard to THAAD and MD which are neither in the interest of Korea's allies nor in its own, as without the presence of the United States Forces in Korea and Japanese intelligence its situation towards North Korea would be even more vulnerable than it is today. At the same time, South Korea continues to struggle with its colonial past under Japanese rule, and remains deeply suspicious of the defence activities of its presumed security partner:

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<sup>2</sup> ROK 2016 Defense White Paper, p. 155.

[http://www.mnd.go.kr/user/mndEN/upload/pbictn/PBLICTNEBOOK\\_201705180357180050.pdf](http://www.mnd.go.kr/user/mndEN/upload/pbictn/PBLICTNEBOOK_201705180357180050.pdf) (last visited on April 28, 2020).

<sup>3</sup> Ōta Fumio: "Kankoku ha Beikoku no dōmeikoku na no ka?" [Is Korea really still a US ally?] Dec. 26, 2019.

<https://jinf.jp/feedback/archives/28389/#> (last visited March 7, 2020).

<sup>4</sup> Henry Farrell and Abraham L. Newman: "Weaponized Interdependence: How Global Economic Networks Shape State Coercion". In: *International Security*, Volume 44, Issue 1, Summer 2019, p. 42-79. [https://doi.org/10.1162/isec\\_a\\_00351](https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00351)



In July 2014, under the mantra of “proactive pacifism,” Japan changed its constitutional interpretation of exercising the right to collective self-defense, and has been since expanding the role of the Japan Self-Defense Forces (JSDF).<sup>5</sup>

This leads to an extremely narrow South Korean interpretation of the mutual intelligence sharing agreements:

Under the ROK-Japan GSOMIA, only selective sets of information are shared and exchanged on a case-by-case basis. therefore, this agreement is unrelated to and has no bearing on Japan’s bid to become a regional power and will not lead to the deployment of the Japanese Self-Defense Forces in the Korean peninsula or the integration of the ROK into the regional MD system.<sup>6</sup>

### **Key Takeaways – I: China successfully enlarges its regional footprint**

China pursues numerous regional activities with the common goal of driving back, or at least undermining the presence of the United States in the Pacific, a nation perceived by China not only as a trading partner, but more so as an adversary, notably due to the continuing security support of the United States for South Korea, Japan and Taiwan. As mentioned above, the reduced deployment of the THAAD system in South Korea can be considered by China as a successful hit not only against the US, but also against the US-led East Asian security architecture as a whole.

China is equally successful in claiming dominance in the South China Sea while profiting from the current global focus on the Covid-19 pandemic as it announced the establishment of new administrative regions in the South China Sea on April 19, 2020, making them formally part of Sansha on Hainan.<sup>7</sup> In its handling of the dispute on the South China Sea, China ignores international law and rather favours bilateral talks with regional nations, straightforwardly undermining existing collective arrangements between neighbouring countries, despite China’s own commitment to multilateral treaties like the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Seas (UNCLOS) to which China is a party (China signed and ratified both the Convention and the Agreement relating to the implementation of Part XI of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea and deposited them on June 7, 1996). The multi-billion dollar trade package promised by China to Philippine President Duterte after the Philippines backed off from the 2016 UNCLOS-PCA ruling on Spratly did not materialize to the promised

<sup>5</sup> ROK 2016 Defense White Paper, p. 17; ROK 2018 Defense White Paper, p. 18.

[http://www.mnd.go.kr/user/mndEN/upload/pblict/n/PBLICTNEBOOK\\_201908070153390840.pdf](http://www.mnd.go.kr/user/mndEN/upload/pblict/n/PBLICTNEBOOK_201908070153390840.pdf) (last visited February 12, 2020).

<sup>6</sup> ROK 2016 Defense White Paper, p. 257.

<sup>7</sup> The PRC Ministry of Civil Affairs announced on April 18, 2020: “The State Council recently approved the establishment of Xisha District and Nansha District in Sansha City, Hainan Province. The Xisha District of Sansha City has jurisdiction over the islands and reefs of the Xisha [Paracel] Islands and its sea areas. It hosts the islands and reefs of the Zhongsha Islands and its sea areas. The People’s Government of Xisha District is stationed on Yongxing [Woody] Island. Nansha District of Sansha City has jurisdiction over the islands and reefs of the Nansha [Spratly] Islands and their sea areas, and the People’s Government of Nansha District is stationed in Yongshu Jiao [Fiery Cross Reef].” (Source: Ministry of Civil Affairs, <http://www.mca.gov.cn/article/xw/tzgg/202004/20200400026955.shtml>, last visited on April 28, 2020). (English names added by the author).

See also: Richard Javad Heydarian (2020-04-21): “China lays ever larger claim to South China Sea”.

<https://asiatimes.com/2020/04/china-lays-ever-larger-claim-to-south-china-sea/> (last visited on April 28, 2020).

See also: “Chūgoku, Minami shina kai ni shin gyōseiku wo setchi, Betonamu mo hanpatsu” [China to establish new administrative region in the South China Sea --- Vietnam also protests], April 20, 2020.

<https://www.nikkei.com/article/DGXMZO58248150Q0A420C2EAF000/> (last visited on April 27, 2020).



extent, but Duterte's 2016 announcement of "separation from the United States" substantially weakened the geopolitical position of the Philippines.<sup>8</sup>

Any further militarization by China in the South China Sea, e.g. by area denial or area closure directed against the U.S. Navy, with immediate impact on innocent passage, will directly harm the interests of all Pacific Rim nations, including South Korea and Japan even though they are not direct neighbours of the South China Sea area.

### **Key Takeaways – II: The need for a collective security commitment**

In light of a multitude of external and a few internal factors weakening the U.S. security assistance to the region, it is critical to understand why key U.S. allies with shared security interests, like South Korea and Japan, have such great difficulties building a common security framework which is *not* hampered by overwhelming reservations; with regard to the GSOMIA, the official stance of South Korea on Japan's revised interpretation of the Constitution (see above) evokes images of the past – Japanese occupation, war crimes and territorial conflict (which is epitomized by the ongoing maritime conflict around the Liancourt Rocks) – rather than a commitment to a common future of collective security. Yet any perceived or real weakness is immediately exploited by third parties as the THAAD example shows.

### **Key Takeaways – III: Lessons for Europe**

As remote as East Asia may seem to many Europeans, the region and its issues are much closer to Europe than many European nations realize. Not only do the European Union as a whole and her individual member states heavily rely on international trade with East Asia and the security of trade routes in the Pacific, but Europe also relies on the same guarantor of security as Japan and South Korea, namely the United States. Especially in difficult times with mutual frictions on global topics like climate change, health care, defence and trade, the U.S.-European relationship remains as important as ever.<sup>9</sup> Finally, both regions experience a similar mixture of multidimensional interdependencies facing China's Belt and Road Initiative. In Asia as in Europe, China has become the biggest foreign trade partner for many countries, and China's advances towards Central and Eastern European Countries as formalized in the 17+1 format (formerly 16+1) pose an immediate threat to the cohesion and decision-making ability of the European Union. Thus, regional leadership should neither be seen in security terms as a replacement of perceived United States dominance, nor should be understood as a "bid for regional power", but rather should be seen as an active contribution to collective security. However, amidst populist sentiment and nationalistic movements rallying under "Our Country First!" calls, the commitment to collective security needs patience, perseverance and a willingness to explain and defend seemingly unpopular policies.

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<sup>8</sup> Richard Javad Heydarian: "Duterte's Dance With China – Why the Philippines Won't Abandon Washington". April 26, 2017, Foreign Affairs. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/philippines/2017-04-26/dutertes-dance-china> (last visited on April 28, 2020).

<sup>9</sup> Karen Donfried and Wolfgang Ischinger: "The Pandemic and the Toll of Transatlantic Discord: At a Time of Crisis, the U.S.-European Relationship Can—and Must—Be Saved". April 18, 2020, Foreign Affairs. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-04-18/pandemic-and-toll-transatlantic-discord> (last visited on April 29, 2020).



**Remarks:** Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the author.

### About the Author of this Issue

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Dr Oliver Corff is a sinologist and an independent scholar. He studied in Berlin and Shanghai, was a foreign research fellow at the University of Tokyo and is a visiting researcher at the Academy of Sciences, Mongolia. He works as a consultant and interpreter for German government institutions and political foundations and is a guest lecturer at the Federal Academy for Security Policy (BAKS). He writes and lectures on China's grand strategy and military transformation in China and Japan.

In 2015, he was awarded the Clausewitz Medal of the City of Burg.



*Oliver Corff*