

TAKEAWAYS FROM A TIME OF INCREASED FRICTION: SOUTH KOREA-JAPAN SECURITY COOPERATION FROM 2015 TO PRESENT

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ABSTRACT

South Korea and Japan share common challenges and liberal democratic values but have been unable to build a close security relationship, due mainly to their political differences. This paper examines the two countries' defense cooperation in the bilateral, trilateral, and multilateral arenas over the past six years to explore how the external security environment, as well as bilateral political problems, have affected their joint activities. The paper's analysis shows that defense cooperation between South Korea and Japan is not always a binary choice between full cooperation or no cooperation. The two countries not only weigh external threats and bilateral problems, but also ponder such factors as U.S. encouragement to adjust the scope of their cooperation. The paper also shows that while the main constraint for security cooperation between South Korea and Japan is their historical animosity, in recent years, frictions involving the countries' armed forces have become a new reason for limiting cooperation. As a result, grassroots military-to-military exchanges between the two countries, which in the past continued despite political problems, have largely stopped since late 2018. The paper concludes by proposing that South Korea and Japan work to restore routine bilateral working-level exchanges. It also recommends that the United States continue to urge the two countries to cooperate, and that multilateral exercises be employed as forums for cooperation between the two armed forces, as that is an area that is least impacted by bilateral problems.

Key Words: *South Korea-Japan relations, security cooperation, military exercises, historical problems, United States*

INTRODUCTION¹

South Korea and Japan face common threats and share important traits such as liberal democratic values, but their security cooperation has been less than robust. The two countries were slow to establish a defense relationship, and while cooperation has expanded over the years, it remains curiously limited in many ways for two neighbors with significant similarities.

The limitation is particularly visible in South Korea and Japan's bilateral security relationship. High-level defense exchanges between the two countries began 14 years after the normalization of diplomatic relations in 1965, when the Japanese Defense Agency director general visited South Korea. While the countries have since then expanded the scope of their defense relations to include a variety of lower-level exchanges, cooperation has developed with ebbs and flows and has mainly focused on activities that do not involve operationalized exercises.²

The trilateral security relationship involving South Korea and Japan along with their ally, the United States, also developed slowly, but followed a more linear development path. It deepened after the three countries' defense ministers met in 2009, against the backdrop of increasing North Korean

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nuclear and missile capabilities. The first trilateral joint exercise took place in June 2012, and the three countries have carried out multiple exercises together since then.³

South Korea and Japan also began working side-by-side in multilateral exercises in 1990. The South Korean public had misgivings about the country's military working with its Japanese counterpart when they did so for the first time at RIMPAC (Rim of the Pacific Exercises) 1990 led by the United States.⁴ But since then, the two countries have regularly participated in the biennial exercises and have also taken part in other multilateral exercises, such as Cobra Gold, which is co-hosted by the United States and Thailand.

The slow and uneven progress of South Korea-Japan security cooperation reflects the volatile political relationship between the two, particularly over Japan's 35-year colonization of the Korean Peninsula. The past six years have been an especially turbulent time for security cooperation between the two countries. During this time, political relations between South Korea and Japan initially saw new hopes for improvement, but also deteriorated to their worst in decades over issues related to history. Meanwhile, the North Korean nuclear and missile threat increased to an unprecedented level before easing somewhat.

This paper examines bilateral, trilateral, and multilateral defense cooperation between South Korea and Japan from 2015 to the present to better understand how motivating and inhibiting factors affected their activities (see Appendix for a full list of activities observed). Security cooperation between South Korea and Japan is important not only for deterring the threat from North Korea but also to prepare for any contingency on the Korean Peninsula. Should there be such an event, U.S. forces based in Japan would respond to it and additional U.S. troops would also likely flow through Japan.⁵ In addition, South Korea and Japan's defense cooperation could help shape the region's security environment, coming at a time when concern about the rise of China is increasing among liberal democracies.

This paper is organized into three main sections. The first is a brief overview of the factors that affect defense cooperation between South Korea and Japan. The second divides the past six years into four time periods that saw differing combinations of bilateral political problems as well as the North Korean threat. The factors that motivated or constrained collaboration are examined for the bilateral, trilateral, and multilateral security cooperation in each time

period. While South Korean and Japanese armed forces may not always come into close contact during large-scale multilateral exercises, they have participated in smaller-scale multilateral exercises that involve only a handful of countries, which will be noted in more detail below. The paper concludes with policy recommendations.

The paper's analysis shows that defense cooperation between South Korea and Japan is not always a binary choice between full cooperation and no cooperation. The two countries not only weigh external threats and bilateral problems, but also consider factors such as U.S. encouragement to adjust the scope of their cooperation. The paper also shows that while the main constraint for security cooperation between South Korea and Japan is their historical animosity, in recent years, friction involving the countries' armed forces has become a reason for limiting cooperation. As a result, grassroots military-to-military exchanges between the two countries, which in the past continued despite political problems, have largely been halted since late 2018. This means that the long-held view that cooperation between South Korean and Japanese working-level defense officials incurs fewer difficulties than higher-level exchanges may no longer be true.⁶

The paper proposes that South Korea and Japan work to restore routine bilateral working-level exchanges. It also recommends that the United States continue to encourage the two countries to cooperate, and that multilateral exercises be utilized as forums for cooperation between the two armed forces, as that is an area that is least impacted by bilateral problems.

FACTORS AFFECTING SOUTH KOREA-JAPAN DEFENSE COOPERATION

At the top of the list of factors that constrain South Korea-Japan defense cooperation is the countries' historical animosity. While problems go back to the Japanese invasion of Korea in the 16th century, the 1910-1945 Japanese colonization of the Korean Peninsula evokes particularly strong emotions. Memories of Japan's conscription of Korean laborers as well as the forced mobilization of women to serve as sex slaves for Japanese troops run deep and have yet to heal. Given the role of the Japanese military in the colonization of the Korean Peninsula, South Koreans remain particularly suspicious of any activities undertaken by the Japanese Self-Defense Forces (SDF).

Another important flashpoint between the two countries that inhibits cooperation is their longstanding dispute over the ownership of the Liancourt Rocks, known as Dokdo in South and North Korea and Takeshima in Japan.⁷ The issue has been highly politicized over the last two decades, with South Korean political leaders visiting the islets and Japanese local authorities designating a “Takeshima Day” to highlight the issue.⁸

At times, the armed forces of the two countries have become the central players of bilateral disputes, which, in turn, interfere with cooperation. For example, when South Korean troops participating in a U.N. peacekeeping operation in South Sudan in 2013 found themselves with a limited supply of ammunition, Japan provided ammunition to the South Koreans through the United Nations. That was met with heavy criticism from the South Korean public, which remains sensitive to any cooperation between the two armed forces, and South Korea returned the 10,000 rounds that Japan supplied.⁹ Another notable controversy took place in October 2018, when the South Korean navy asked its Japanese counterpart not to fly the “Rising Sun” flag, the Japanese Maritime Self Defense Force (JMSDF) ensign, during an international fleet review in South Korea. This led to Japanese withdrawal from the event.¹⁰ The flag is controversial in South Korea because it was used by the Imperial Japanese navy during World War II. Although the JMSDF had flown the ensign in past events, the new South Korean navy request came amid increased criticisms from citizens’ groups.¹¹ Yet another controversy took place in December 2018, when a South Korean destroyer allegedly directed its targeting radar at a Japanese surveillance aircraft, an act that can be considered only a step away from firing on the plane. South Korea denied the allegation, saying that the South Korean warship used an optical camera on the Japanese plane, which it spotted while trying to come to the aid of a North Korean fishing boat in distress.¹²

On the other hand, there are external threats that motivate South Korea and Japan to cooperate militarily. The main reason for cooperation thus far has been the threat posed by North Korea, which has markedly increased its nuclear and missile capabilities over the last 20 years. North Korea now has missiles capable of reaching a variety of targets in both countries.¹³

Despite China’s increasingly belligerent behavior in the region, a question mark remains suspended over the extent to which China belongs in the same category as North

Korea. The relationships South Korea and Japan have with China differ, and that divergence is growing. South Korea, having a much closer economic relationship with China than Japan, often faces a complicated balancing act of ensuring economic and security interests simultaneously.¹⁴ Japan has a territorial dispute with China and worries about China’s incursions into waters and airspace near disputed islets, which have increased over the years.

Another external factor that facilitates South Korea-Japan defense cooperation is U.S. encouragement. While South Korea and Japan do not have a formal security partnership, the two countries are both close military allies of the United States, which has repeatedly facilitated cooperation between its two allies.¹⁵

SOUTH KOREA-JAPAN DEFENSE COOPERATION FROM LATE 2015 TO PRESENT

From the “Comfort Women” Agreement in 2015 to the Signing of the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) in 2016

Relations between South Korea and Japan were severely strained in the early 2010s due to a series of bilateral disputes. This included South Korean President Lee Myung-bak’s visit to the disputed Liancourt Rocks in 2012, which was seen by Japan as a provocative act, and Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe’s official visit in 2013 to the Yasukuni Shrine, which angered South Koreans because it enshrines Class A war criminals among Japan’s war-dead.¹⁶ So tense were the relations that the two countries suspended summit talks for over three years, resuming them only in November 2015.¹⁷

But new hope for improvement in South Korea-Japan relations emerged when President Park Geun-hye, Lee’s successor, and Abe reached a breakthrough agreement in December 2015 on the issue of Korean women who were forced into sexual slavery by Japanese authorities in World War II. Under the agreement, Japan issued an apology and promised to provide funds to a foundation established by the South Korean government that would help surviving “comfort women.” At the time of the agreement’s announcement, the two governments said they considered it to be a “final and irreversible resolution” to one of the thorniest of history-related problems between the two countries.¹⁸

More progress in bilateral relations was made in November 2016 when South Korea and Japan signed a military intelligence sharing agreement. The conclusion of the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) was the culmination of years of ups and downs in negotiations. The two governments first agreed to work on the deal in 2011, against the background of North Korea's attack on the South Korean corvette *Cheonan* and shelling of Yeonpyeong Island in 2010, which resulted in the deaths of South Korean soldiers and civilians. The collaboration made sense, as it would bring together South Korea's strength in human intelligence regarding North Korea and Japan's established ability to use intelligence satellites to gain information on North Korea. The move to cooperate gained further momentum after North Korea launched a satellite into space in 2012.¹⁹

The two countries came close to concluding the agreement in 2012, but South Korea pulled out at the last moment. That development followed a backlash in South Korea, partly because of public sentiment against Japan, but also because of criticism directed against South Korean President Lee's handling of the sensitive agreement. The Korean National Assembly criticized the Lee administration for what it perceived as a process that lacked transparency.²⁰

Two years after the sudden pullout, South Korea and Japan took a step toward greater cooperation by reaching an agreement to share information through the United States on North Korean nuclear and missile threats.²¹ GSOMIA, which allows the countries to directly share military intelligence, was finally signed in November 2016, against the backdrop of better relations between the two countries. The two countries first shared information based on the agreement in December 2016.

South Korean and Japanese armed forces also began a new trilateral exercise with the United States in the same time frame. The three countries held the first Pacific Dragon anti-ballistic missile exercises in June 2016, followed by another round of the missile-tracking exercise later that year, to improve trilateral coordination against the North Korean missile threat.²²

South Korea and Japan also held regular bilateral activities and participated in multilateral exercises during this time frame. This included biennial search and rescue exercises carried out by the two navies. The exercises began in 1999

as part of a warming of relations following a joint declaration issued by South Korean President Kim Dae-jung and Japanese Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi aimed at putting the countries' relations on a new footing.²³ South Korean and Japanese defense ministers held talks four times in 2016, and military officials of varying ranks paid reciprocal visits, which had become routine. South Korean and Japanese armed forces also joined multiple multilateral exercises such as the U.S.-sponsored Red Flag Alaska exercise, RIMPAC, and Cobra Gold exercise.²⁴

A closer look at South Korea-Japan security cooperation during this time frame shows that the improvement in relations between South Korea and Japan was an important factor that contributed to the signing of the GSOMIA, which was the first and thus far only military agreement between the two countries. But it is important to note that the North Korean threat also played an important role in driving the two countries to work together. North Korea, under leader Kim Jong Un, was increasing its efforts to improve its missile arsenal, test-firing 15 short-range ballistic missiles in 2015, and then test-firing 23 missiles of varying ranges and launching a satellite launch vehicle in 2016.²⁵ The North Korea threat was particularly important for encouraging trilateral defense cooperation, which included a new type of exercise specifically designed to counter missiles fired by hostile actors. In short, cooperation during this period was both motivated by the North Korean threat and assisted by an improvement in bilateral relations.

"Fire and Fury" in 2017

The goodwill between South Korea and Japan eroded significantly in 2017. By early 2017, the "comfort women" agreement was facing strong opposition, particularly from the South Korean public which believed survivors were not adequately consulted during the negotiations.²⁶ In January 2017, South Korean activists erected a statue of a "comfort woman" in front of the Japanese consulate in Busan. Japan saw this as a breach of the agreement and recalled its ambassador to Seoul for three months, the longest time since the normalization of their relations in 1965.²⁷ The South Koreans, meanwhile, were angered by a visit to the Yasukuni Shrine in December 2016 by Japanese Defense Minister Tomomi Inada. The visit also frustrated American military officials who were trying to foster trilateral defense cooperation in the face of the North Korean threat.²⁸

Meanwhile, tensions over North Korea reached a new high in 2017, following the country's first test-firings of an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) that put the continental United States within range. U.S. President Donald Trump responded to the July test-firings of the Hwasong-14 by saying that North Korea would elicit "fire and fury" like it has never seen if it does not stop threatening the United States.²⁹ In addition, Trump tweeted that "military solutions are now fully in place, locked and loaded, should North Korea act unwisely."³⁰ In response, the North Korean military issued an unusually specific warning against Guam, saying that it was examining a plan that would make "an enveloping strike" on the island with simultaneous launchings of four intermediate-range missiles.³¹ Despite economic and military pressure from the United States, North Korea conducted its sixth nuclear test in September and test-fired its most powerful ICBM Hwasong-15 in November.

Against this backdrop, South Korea and Japan increased their defense cooperation. In addition to holding two routine in-person talks, the two countries' defense ministers held four telephone discussions that year. Defense officials from South Korea, Japan, and the United States also held frequent talks at various levels, both in person and over the phone.

The most notable aspect of defense cooperation between South Korea and Japan in 2017 was the increase in trilateral exercises. In addition to the five joint exercises held throughout the year, the three countries held multiple "show of force" flights over the Korean Peninsula that were meant to demonstrate the countries' capability and resolve to counter any threat from North Korea.³² But the deterioration in relations between South Korea and Japan manifested itself in subtle ways during the trilateral cooperation. For example, South Korean and Japanese aircraft escorted U.S. planes separately during trilateral flights on the Korean Peninsula, because South Korea and Japan could not agree to have their aircraft seen together in the same photograph.³³

South Korean and Japanese armed forces joined the routine multilateral exercises in 2017, including the RIMPAC and Red Flag Alaska exercises held in June.

South Korean and Japanese activities during this period show that the North Korean threat drove the two countries to increase their defense cooperation, both bilaterally and trilaterally, despite strains in their relations. But at times, tensions in bilateral relations prevented the two countries

from cooperating to the full extent possible, as can be seen in the case of the trilateral "show of force" flights. This demonstrates that while South Korea and Japan do not always completely stop their defense cooperation because of bilateral problems, they could reduce the scope of that cooperation because of them.

From the Flare-up Over South Korean Court Order on Forced Laborers in 2018 to Continued Bilateral Tensions in 2019

Relations between South Korea and Japan further deteriorated in 2018. This began in late 2018, when a South Korean court ordered a Japanese company to pay compensation for Koreans who were forced to work in its factories during World War II.³⁴ The move drew sharp criticisms from Japan, which insists that the 1965 treaty that normalized relations between the two countries settled all such issues. Under the treaty, Japan provided \$300 million in grants and \$200 million in long-term, low-interest loans to South Korea, which contributed to the country's economic development.³⁵ South Korean President Moon Jae-in's position was that the decision of the courts should be respected.

The two countries' relations worsened further in the summer of 2019, after Japan imposed a series of export restrictions against South Korea. South Korea interpreted the Japanese action as retaliation against Seoul's handling of the history-related dispute.³⁶ Shortly afterward, South Korea gave the three months' notice required for its withdrawal from GSOMIA. However, South Korea reversed its decision shortly before it took effect in November 2019, in large part due to U.S. pressure to maintain the intelligence-sharing pact.³⁷

This was also a time when the two countries' armed forces became the main protagonists in some of the disputes between the two countries. The "Rising Flag" incident in October 2018 and the "radar lock" controversy in December 2018, noted above, significantly cooled the two forces' desire to cooperate with each other.

Meanwhile, tensions over North Korea subsided in 2018. From early that year, North Korea conducted a series of frenetic diplomatic activities that began with accepting a South Korean invitation to participate in the Pyeongchang Winter Olympics. Subsequently, North Korea's Kim held summit talks with his counterparts from the United States, South Korea, China, and Russia. Another important

development took place in April 2018 when North Korea announced that it was refraining from nuclear tests as well as the test-firings of long-range missiles. As of August 2021, North Korea has maintained that self-imposed moratorium, although it resumed test-launches of short-range ballistic missiles in 2019, conducting more than 25 launches of missiles of varying capabilities that are likely to complicate the South Korean and Japanese ballistic missile defense systems.³⁸

Despite the political problems, higher-level South Korean and Japanese defense officials held regular talks both bilaterally and trilaterally with the United States. The meetings were held on the sidelines of two conferences in Southeast Asia, one hosted by the London-based think tank International Institute of Strategic Studies (IISS), and another that brought together participants of the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM Plus). Reflecting the strained relations, the bilateral defense ministers' talks held at the IISS conference were downgraded to "informal" status.³⁹

Other types of bilateral defense cooperation suffered during this time. One of the most significant developments was the possible unraveling of GSOMIA. This would have stopped South Korea and Japan from directly sharing intelligence, although they could have continued to do so through the United States. South Korea ultimately reversed its decision after coming under pressure from the United States.⁴⁰ South Korea and Japan have continued to exchange sensitive military information, doing so twice in 2018 and eight times in the first eight months of 2019.⁴¹

Unlike the higher-level talks, grassroots-level bilateral exchanges including port calls and routine visits by military officials stopped after the "radar-lock" incident in December 2018. In another sign of tensions, Japan did not invite South Korea to an international fleet review that it hosted in 2019, even though it invited China.⁴² The two armed forces also did not hold their biennial search-and-rescue exercises in 2019. This was the second known cancellation since 2001, when South Korea postponed the drill due to a dispute over the Japanese Education Ministry's approval of a nationalistic publisher's textbook, which was controversial because of its treatment of Japan's wartime actions.⁴³ While talks between working level officials during this time frame were not halted completely, they were held fewer times than normal, with only one directors' level meeting taking place in 2019.

In contrast, South Korean and Japanese armed forces participated actively in multilateral exercises. They not only took part in routine activities but also joined in new efforts such as the Pacific Vanguard, a four-country maritime exercise with the United States and Australia that was launched in 2019.⁴⁴ South Korea and Japan also participated in the Enforcement Coordination Cell (ECC), which was established in 2018 as part of an effort to coordinate information on North Korea's violations of U.N. sanctions. The ECC is headquartered aboard the *USS Blue Ridge*, flagship of the 7th fleet based in Yokosuka, Japan, and brings together the United States and its "Five Eyes" partners, Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom, in addition to its two Asian allies and France.⁴⁵

The pattern of South Korean and Japanese behavior during this time shows that U.S. encouragement for the two countries to cooperate can have a significant impact. For example, GSOMIA was saved at least partly due to U.S. pressure on South Korea not to abandon the agreement. The regular trilateral defense ministers' talks also ensured that a venue for contact between the South Korean and Japanese defense ministers was maintained. The trilateral talks may also have encouraged the two defense ministers to meet separately beforehand to prevent the souring of bilateral relations from impacting trilateral cooperation.

Examination of this period also shows that a series of disputes between the South Korean and Japanese armed forces was a major reason to curtail working-level cooperation. In the past, exchanges at the working-level continued even when higher-level talks were more susceptible to political winds.⁴⁶ But since the "radar lock" incident in December 2018, there have been no reciprocal port calls, which had become routine in recent decades. The last such event took place when South Korean ships and cadets visited Japan in November 2018.⁴⁷ Largely absent also from late 2018 are exchanges of cadet officers and joint staff college students, which had also become frequent over the last two decades and continued even when overall relations were strained.⁴⁸

Another characteristic of this period is that despite their bilateral problems, South Korea and Japan not only continued to participate in routine multilateral military cooperation but also began new types of exercises and operations in a multilateral format. In short, South Korea and Japan dramatically reduced bilateral working-level

cooperation due to their problems during this time frame but continued their trilateral cooperation and broadened multilateral collaboration.

From COVID-19 in 2020 to August 2021

The COVID-19 pandemic that spread worldwide in early 2020 disrupted many international activities, including defense cooperation. South Korea and Japan did not hold military exchanges or bilateral high-level talks in this time frame. But the pandemic alone does not explain the lack of bilateral interaction, as both South Korea and Japan held military exercises with the United States.⁴⁹ The three countries' working-level defense officials and military chiefs of staff also held talks in 2020.⁵⁰ Moreover, the two countries continued to participate in multilateral exercises in 2020, including RIMPAC, Cobra Gold, and Pacific Vanguard.

Also notable is the fact that the Japanese armed forces actively held exercises with countries other than South Korea. For example, the Japanese SDF held four bilateral exercises with its Australian counterpart in 2020.⁵¹ It also held joint activities with foreign forces at a pace of twice a week since the beginning of 2021.⁵² Japan's choice of partners for cooperation appears to reflect its increasing concern about China's activities near the Taiwan Strait as well as the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands in the East China Sea. This could mean that Japan does not see South Korea as an indispensable partner with whom it needs to cooperate, despite bilateral problems, to counter the threat of China.

The North Korean threat during this time continued, albeit at a lower level of intensity compared to previous years, as the country closed itself off from the world after the emergence of COVID-19. North Korea continued with its efforts to improve its missile arsenal, conducting nine test-firings of short-range ballistic missiles between 2020 and early 2021.

CONCLUSIONS AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The examination of six years of South Korea-Japan defense cooperation shows that while the North Korean threat incentivizes defense cooperation between South Korea and Japan, bilateral problems constrain its depth and scope. South Korea and Japan either expanded or reduced their security cooperation depending on how much weight they placed on the North Korean threat, their own bilateral problems and, at times, U.S. pressure for them to cooperate.

Meanwhile, security cooperation in a multilateral format proved not to be as sensitive to the impact of bilateral problems, even when it includes fewer countries, such as the four-country cooperation among South Korea, Japan, the United States and Australia.

While it is important for the two countries to remove or at least reduce the impact of the main obstacle to defense cooperation, namely their historical animosity, that is likely to take time. Still, there are policy implications that can be drawn from the analysis that could be useful for the immediate future.

The first is the importance of getting South Korean and Japanese working-level cooperation back on track. The loss of trust between the two armed forces is worrisome not only because they are responsible for responding to any crisis, but also because they tend to see the value of bilateral defense cooperation more than others. While the halt in military exchanges coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic, the central problem remains bilateral issues. The South Korean and Japanese governments should consider reinstating some of the exchanges that have not taken place in recent years.

The second is the importance of the role played by the United States. The United States has been key in maintaining both trilateral and bilateral cooperation between South Korea and Japan. This can be seen in the case of GSOMIA. The United States not only brokered the initial agreement, but also played a crucial role in preventing the cancellation of the military intelligence sharing pact between South Korea and Japan. The United States should continue encouraging the two countries to cooperate in areas big and small.

The third is the importance of the multilateral format of cooperation. While not all multilateral exercises involve close contact between South Korea and Japan, this is an area that has been expanded despite the deterioration in South Korea-Japan relations. This format should be utilized to encourage a deeper form of cooperation between the two countries' armed forces.

To date, China has not been a main reason for South Korea-Japan defense cooperation or their trilateral military collaboration with the United States. Whether China will become a motivating factor is an important question, as that may tip the scale in favor of more defense cooperation. If not, South Korea-Japan security cooperation will likely face an even bumpier path ahead.

APPENDIX. TABLE OF SOUTH KOREA-JAPAN DEFENSE COOPERATION (2015-AUGUST 2021)

Year	Bilateral defense cooperation and notable cancellations	Trilateral Defense Cooperation	South Korea and Japanese Participation in Multilateral Defense Exercises
2021		<p>APRIL</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Military chiefs of staff meet in Hawaii 	<p>AUGUST</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SEACAT 21 <p>JULY</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Talisman Sabre <p>JUNE</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • US, Australia, Japan and South Korea joint exercise • Red Flag Alaska
2020		<p>NOVEMBER</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Military chiefs of staff hold video conference <p>MAY</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 12th Defense Trilateral Talks <p>APRIL</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pacific Dragon (reported by South Korean media) 	<p>SEPTEMBER</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pacific Vanguard <p>AUGUST</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • RIMPAC <p>JULY</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Operation Atalanta <p>APRIL</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Multilateral anti-piracy drill <p>JANUARY</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sea Dragon (first time for South Korea) • Cobra Gold 20
2019	<p>NOVEMBER</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Defense ministers' talks in Bangkok on the sidelines of 6th ADMM plus, • Directors' level meeting • South Korea announces it will keep GSOMIA <p>OCTOBER</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • GSOMIA information sharing • GSOMIA information sharing <p>SEPTEMBER</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Japan does not invite South Korea for international naval fleet review 	<p>NOVEMBER</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Defense ministers' meeting in Thailand • Military chiefs of staff video conference <p>OCTOBER</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Military chiefs of staff meeting in Washington DC 	<p>SEPTEMBER</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ADMM-plus PKO exercise

Year	Bilateral defense cooperation and notable cancellations	Trilateral Defense Cooperation	South Korea and Japanese Participation in Multilateral Defense Exercises
<p>2019 (cont.)</p>	<p>AUGUST</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • GSOMIA information sharing • South Korea announces it will withdraw from GSOMIA <p>JULY</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • GSOMIA information sharing <p>JUNE</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Defense ministers’ talks at Shangri-la dialogue <p>FEBRUARY</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Japan announces it is not sending its helicopter carrier on a port call to South Korea 	<p>JUNE</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Defense ministers’ meeting on the sidelines of the Shangri-la dialogue, June 2019 <p>MAY</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Defense officials’ working-level meeting 	<p>JULY</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ADMM-plus humanitarian and disaster rescue exercise • South Korea-hosted PSI Eastern Endeavor 19 <p>JUNE</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Red Flag Alaska • Khaan Quest <p>MAY</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pacific Vanguard <p>MARCH</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • MEDEX 2019 <p>JANUARY</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cobra Gold 19
<p>2018</p>	<p>DECEMBER</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Japan accuses South Korean military of locking its targeting radar at a Japanese surveillance aircraft <p>NOVEMBER</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • South Korean ships and cadets make port call to Sasebo, Japan <p>OCTOBER</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • JMSDF official participates in South Korean symposium • Defense ministers’ talks on sidelines of ADMM plus • JMSDF withdraws from international fleet review in South Korea after being asked not to fly its ensign <p>SEPTEMBER</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Military chiefs of staff hold video conference <p>JUNE</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Defense ministers’ talks on sidelines of Shangri-la 	<p>OCTOBER</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Defense ministers’ meeting on sidelines of ADMM-plus • Military chiefs of staff meeting in Washington <p>JULY</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trilateral WMD exercise as part of Pacific Shield <p>JUNE</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Defense ministers’ meeting on sidelines of Shangri-la <p>MAY</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Military chiefs of staff’ meeting in Hawaii 	<p>SEPTEMBER</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enforcement Coordination Cell <p>JULY</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pacific Shield 18 <p>JUNE</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • RIMPAC 2018, June-August • Khaan Quest

Year	Bilateral defense cooperation and notable cancellations	Trilateral Defense Cooperation	South Korea and Japanese Participation in Multilateral Defense Exercises
<p>2018 (cont.)</p>	<p>APRIL</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • South Korean Army chief of staff visits Japan <p>MARCH</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 11th South Korea-Japan security talks in Tokyo 	<p>MARCH</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Defense working-level meeting in Washington DC 	<p>APRIL</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Japan sends observers to ADMM-plus <p>JANUARY</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nimble Titan • Cobra Gold 18
<p>2017</p>	<p>DECEMBER</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Navy SAREX in area near Yokosuka, Japan • South Korean Navy's visit to Yokosuka, Japan <p>OCTOBER</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • JMSDF visit to South Korea • Defense ministers' talks on sidelines of 4th ADMM-plus <p>SEPTEMBER</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • JSDF chief of staff visits South Korea • Defense ministers' telephone talks • JGSDF chief visit to South Korea <p>JULY</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Defense ministers' telephone talks <p>JUNE</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Defense ministers' meeting on sidelines of Shangri-la conference <p>MAY</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Defense ministers' telephone talks <p>MARCH</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Defense ministers' telephone talks 	<p>DECEMBER</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trilateral joint exercise • Director-general level video conference • US bombers fly with Japanese and South Korean jets <p>OCTOBER</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trilateral joint exercise • Military chiefs of staff meeting in Hawaii • Defense ministers' meeting at ADMM plus • Show of force flights <p>SEPTEMBER</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Show of force flights • Director-general level video conference <p>AUGUST</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Show of force flights • Director-general level video conference <p>JULY</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Director-general level video conference <p>JUNE</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Defense ministers' meeting on the sidelines of the Shangri-la dialogue <p>MAY</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Military chiefs of staff telephone conference <p>APRIL</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trilateral joint exercise • Defense working-level meeting in Tokyo <p>MARCH</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trilateral joint exercise 	<p>JULY</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Khaan Quest, July-August <p>JUNE</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Red Flag Alaska <p>APRIL</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Multilateral anti-piracy exercise <p>MARCH</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pacific Partnership, March-May • Global Peace Operations Initiative March-April

Year	Bilateral defense cooperation and notable cancellations	Trilateral Defense Cooperation	South Korea and Japanese Participation in Multilateral Defense Exercises
2017 (cont.)	<p>FEBRUARY</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • South Korean Army officer visits Japan 	<p>JANUARY</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trilateral joint exercise 	<p>JANUARY</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cobra Gold, January-February
2016	<p>DECEMBER</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • First sharing of information about North Korea through GSOMIA <p>NOVEMBER</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • GSOMIA approved by South Korean cabinet <p>SEPTEMBER</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Defense ministers hold telephone talks • Defense ministry officials meet at 5th Seoul Defense Dialogue <p>JULY</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • South Korean Navy makes port call to Atsugi, Japan <p>JUNE</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Defense ministers' meeting on sidelines of Shangri-la dialogue • JMSDF official visits South Korea <p>MAY</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • JGSDF official visits South Korea • JMSDF participates in South Korea-hosted West Pacific submarine SAREX <p>APRIL</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • South Korean joint chief of staff visits Japan <p>MARCH</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • JSMDf chief of staff visits South Korea <p>FEBRUARY</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Defense ministers' telephone conversation <p>JANUARY</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Defense ministers' telephone conversation 	<p>DECEMBER</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Defense working-level talks <p>NOVEMBER</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Missile-tracking exercise <p>OCTOBER</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Military chiefs of staff meeting in Washington DC • Counter-WMD exercise <p>SEPTEMBER</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Director general-level video conference <p>JUNE</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Defense ministers' meeting on sidelines of Shangri-la dialogue • Missile-tracking exercise (Pacific Dragon) <p>FEBRUARY</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Director general -level video conference • Military chiefs of staff video conference <p>JANUARY</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Director general-level video conference 	<p>OCTOBER</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Red Flag exercise <p>SEPTEMBER</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ADMM-Plus humanitarian and disaster relief <p>JUNE</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • RIMPAC, June-August • Pacific Partnership, June-August <p>MAY</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ADMM Plus anti-terrorism exercise • West Pacific submarine exercise <p>FEBRUARY</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nimble Titan <p>JANUARY</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cobra Gold, January-February

Year	Bilateral defense cooperation and notable cancellations	Trilateral Defense Cooperation	South Korea and Japanese Participation in Multilateral Defense Exercises
2015	<p>NOVEMBER</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • South Korean navy band participates in JSDF music event <p>OCTOBER</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • South Korea sends navy vessel to the Japanese international naval fleet review for the first time in 13 years • JASDF chief of staff visits South Korea • Joint military SAREX • Defense ministers’ meeting in South Korea • Japanese defense vice minister visits South Korea <p>SEPTEMBER</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Defense vice minister-level meeting in Seoul <p>AUGUST</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 21st Director-level dialogue in Seoul <p>MAY</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Defense ministers’ meeting on sidelines of Shangri-la dialogue <p>APRIL</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 10th South Korea-Japan security dialogue in Seoul 	<p>OCTOBER</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trilateral SAREX October 19, 2015 <p>MAY</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Defense ministers’ meeting on sidelines of Shangri-la dialogue <p>APRIL</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Defense working-level meeting in Washington DC 	<p>AUGUST</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Red flag Alaska • Global Peace Operations Initiative <p>MAY</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pacific Partnership, May-August <p>FEBRUARY</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cobra Gold

Note: The information is based on official documents as well as media reports. Please note that not all exercises and meetings are announced or reported.

- JSDF = Japan Self-Defense Force
- JMSDF = Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force
- JGSDF = Japan Ground Self-Defense Force
- JASDF = Japan Air Self-Defense Force
- SAREX = search and rescue exercises
- WMD = weapons of mass destruction

ENDNOTES

- ¹ The author thanks the two U.S. military officers who graciously shared their time with me. The author also thanks Shane Kim of the University of Southern California for contributing to the research. However, any errors are my own.
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