

Foreign Policy of South Korea: GSOMIA In the Yoon Suk-Yeol Era (2022–2024)

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ABSTRACT

The General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) is a military intelligence exchange agreement between South Korea and Japan signed in 2016. GSOMIA emerged in response to increasing regional security threats, particularly from North Korea. However, the bilateral relationship between South Korea and Japan, often plagued by historical tensions and political disputes, has impacted the dynamics of South Korea's foreign policy regarding this agreement. The change of presidential leadership from Moon Jae-In to Yoon Suk-Yeol indicates that this shift is very important in South Korea's foreign policy. In the previous administration, former President Moon Jae-In had considered terminating the GSOMIA agreement due to a trade dispute with Japan. Meanwhile, President Yoon Suk-Yeol's era demonstrated close relations with Japan and the United States. Under his leadership, GSOMIA was reaffirmed as important in facing regional security threats and strengthening South Korea's position amidst Indo-Pacific geopolitical competition. This research focuses on South Korea's policy towards GSOMIA between 2022 and 2024, covering the early period of President Yoon Suk-Yeol's administration. This study uses explanatory qualitative methods with secondary data sources to explain how leadership changes influence the direction of South Korea's foreign policy towards GSOMIA. Using the Foreign Policy Decision Making theory, this study analyzes the South Korean government's decisions to maintain and strengthen GSOMIA in terms of domestic politics, international context, and economic and military conditions.

Keywords: GSOMIA, Yoon Suk-Yeol, Security Threats, Foreign Policy Decision Making

INTRODUCTION

In 2016, South Korea and Japan signed the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA), intelligence on military affairs, to improve sharing of information on regional threats like North Korea. Ever since its inception, the implementation of GSOMIA has been stalled by domestic political issues and the Korea-Japan relations of the time. During Moon Jae-in's administration (2017-2022), bilateral relations reached an extremely low point when, in August 2019, South Korea announced the termination of GSOMIA as a counter measure to Japan's export control to South Korea of certain industrial raw materials. Along with the other USA, South Korea was diplomatically isolated after disclosing the GSOMIA agreement. Nonetheless, the USA managed to pressure South Korea in silent during the pact's renew since they saw it as pivotal for regional balance.

Things took a sharp turn after the appointment of Yoon Suk-yeol in May 2022. In contrast to his predecessor, Yoon advocated for building a closer alliance with Japan as a fundamental counter to North Korea and building stronger trilateral relations with the US. The South Korea government labeled the agreement as 'fully normalized' and in March 2023, they openly revoked the agreement they authored to terminate GSOMIA. The normalization is not only about restoring intelligence exchange channels, but also part of a strategy to strengthen South Korea's position in the Indo-Pacific security architecture, which is increasingly influenced by the rivalry between the United States and China. Although various studies have discussed South Korea-Japan tensions in the context of colonial history and trade disputes, there is still a gap in explaining why Yoon Suk-yeol chose to normalize GSOMIA despite domestic resistance. This is where this study contributes: it uses a foreign policy decision-making framework with three pillars of analysis: domestic politics, international context, and economic and military conditions to understand the factors that drove the decision.

This article argues that the normalization of GSOMIA under Yoon is the result of a strategic calculation in which national Security interests and South Korea's position in the regional geopolitical constellation are considered more important than maintaining historical conflict with Japan. Thus, the normalization of GSOMI reflects Yoon's more pragmatic and pro-US foreign policy orientation in the face of increasingly complex security threats. The purpose of this article is to provide a deeper understanding of the background to the GSOMIA tensions under the Moon Jae-in administration, explain the factors that prompted Yoon Suk-yeol to take the normalization step, and analyze the strategic implications of this policy for Northeast Asian regional security. With this approach, this paper is expected to enrich the literature on South Korea's foreign policy and open up new discussions on the role of national leadership in shaping the direction of international security cooperation.

METHODS

This particular study utilized explanatory qualitative methodologies. The focus of such approach is to analyze South Korea's foreign policy towards the GSOMIA under the Yoon Suk-Yeol administration from the year 2022 to 2024. This policy is known to have restricted South Korea's ability to share military intelligence with other nations. The information utilized is from government documents, scholarly publications, periodicals, and other news media. This analysis mainly depends on secondary data that has undergone extensive literature analysis in order to investigate the cause and effect relationship between shifts in leadership and the corresponding modification or enhancement of foreign defense policy. This approach has been applied rigorously and critically by evaluating the data with respect to the domestic and external shifts which drove the government policy. Therefore, such analysis goes beyond the mere outline of GSOMIA policies and the era of Yoon Suk-Yeol to also account for the rationale and the strategies, which the government devised regarding Foreign Policy Decision Making Theory.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

A. Domestic Political Dynamics in GSOMIA Normalization

The case of the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) is no different from other issues on the Korean Peninsula, particularly the political situation in South Korea. Moon Jae-in was on the verge of cancelling the agreement as the colonial era forced labour issues with Japan was on the rise, making a strong wave of anti-Japan sentiments. In this situation, Moon was perceived as being responsive to public sentiment, albeit with a loss of regional security cooperation. The Mun Suk Yeol was much less constricted than the previous leadership and pursued a pragmatic approach which involved a South Korean domestic set of compensation arrangements which were not directly sought from Japan or its corporations. It provided the foundation to restore diplomatic relations with Tokyo and, at the same time, justified the immigration policy to Japan.

The imports from oppositional political movements, particularly from the Democratic Party, which clearly sees the approach as a form of 'subservient diplomacy' does not stop Suk Yeol in his efforts. Yoon remains consistent in implementing it, emphasizing that national security interests are more urgent than historical differences. The broad powers granted to presidents of South Korea and the accompanying Yoon Yoon Suk-yeol Yoon's strategic decision making, are greatly facilitated through the domestic policies of his administration. The public is disconnected from the burdens of history, and focuses on the administration's goals of regional stability and trilateral cooperation with the United States and Japan. Political factors and public opinion both seem to greatly influence Yoon's decision, Yoon is less concerned with the public's opinion. Yoon's lack of concern represents the predominant factors of security and the political legitimacy unlike other countries, South Korea's rationale seems very different. South Korea emphasizes dominantly restrictive public opinion policies. The South Korean foreign policy is a good example of these flexible policies in public opinion.

Moreover, the need to safeguard the government's image, especially during times with such political polarization, is another reason for Yoon's policy continuity. Yoon also enjoys support from conservative factions, pro-government journalists, and several regional scholars whose work emphasizes the need to reinforce security in the region, which additionally validates the need for him to follow his own policy. In stark contrast to the relative relentless opposition Yoon faces, who have framed GSOMIA's renewal as the unilateral tethering of South Korea to the other regional poles, argue that Yoon is just putting SK in the center of the regional security structure. So, the phenomenon of domestic politics is not simply an obstruction but rather an asset that serves to strengthen his leadership and reinforce South Korea's position within the geopolitics of East Asia.

B. International Context and Strategic Considerations

Since the beginning of his administration, President Yoon Suk Yeol has stated that the foreign policy of South Korea should focus on strengthening relations with the United States and revitalizing relations with Japan. One important instrument in this regard is the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA), which enables Seoul

and Tokyo to share military intelligence, especially on North Korea's nuclear and missile activities. Having been suspended by the Moon Jae-in administration in the context of the disputes over Japan's colonial history and policy on technology exports, GSOMIA has again become a priority under Yoon due to the deteriorating regional security situation. The international context of this policy is the growing threat of North Korea, which is advancing its nuclear and missile programs along with aggressive missile testing. In 2022 and 2023, Pyongyang conducted several tests which included launching medium range ballistic missiles which flew over Japan.

The case at hand underscores the urgent need for quicker actionable intelligence sharing between Seoul and Tokyo. GSOMIA is generally deemed crucial since it offers the two countries a formal channel for sharing difficult data on North Korean military activities in real time. Beyond the North Korean problem, the geo-political balance of the Indo-Pacific region provides other considerations. The strategic competition between the United States and China is increasingly affecting the policymaking of Northeast Asia. Washington has also been a constant proponent encouraging Seoul and Tokyo to deepen their defense relations as part of a coherent defense umbrella for the region. In the other hand, the easing of GSOMIA by Yoon correlates to the assertion of the South Korean position in the trilateral pact with the United States. This is supportive to the 2022 Indo-Pacific policy of Seoul which stresses partnership with South Korea in dealing with global issues.

As much as the threat from North Korea is pressing, the geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific region is just as critical. U.S.-China strategic competition is increasingly shaping the security policy of Northeast Asia. Washington has also for a long time encouraged Seoul and Tokyo to collaborate on other international spheres, for instance, South Korea's changing status in international politics. Yoon has articulated a vision of turning South Korea into a private global state and as such, a country that is active in world affairs beyond Northeast Asia. By renewing GSOMIA, Seoul demonstrated that it can tactically subordinate, for lack of a better word, some of its historical domestic problems in the pursuit of integration for the sake of regional strategic stability. This enhances South Korea's standing with its Western allies, especially the United States which views the trilateral South Korea-Japan-U.S. defense cooperation as a pivotal mechanism for countering the strategic influence of China and Russia in the region.

As such, GSOMIA's normalization during the Yoon Suk Yeol administration is much more than an exchange of sensitive technical information. It is an expression of South Korea's emerging defensive posture toward changes in the global order. For one, it is an attempt to directly counter the security threats posed by North Korea. Two, it is an attempt to recalibrate in the context of the US-China rivalry, where Yoon has opted to reinforce the surging pro-American stance. Three, it fulfills South Korea's aspirations of becoming an active global player by contributing to security on the international system. In other words, the treatment of GSOMIA under Yoon's presidency is illustrative of South Korea's geostrategic orientation toward the world today.

C. Economic and Military Conditions as Drivers of Policy Choices

Under the Presidency of Yoon Suk Yeol the South Korean military gained improved strategic partnerships and increased the capacity of hardware capabilities. South Korean modernization was partially achieved from the preemptive strike and limited retaliation plans deployed against the North Korean missile defense systems that peaked during the 2022 missile tests and still pose the most concern for the stability of the region. Economically, the Yoon period was characterized by a recovery from the post pandemic shock and global slow down, with a resurgence of trade surpluses for the economy, driven by exports of semiconductor and automobile shipments from 2023, even if global figures were declining in 2025 due to constant geopolitical shifts. Inflation that used to be prominent for a long length of time and was above five percent was still above the threshold set by the Bank of Korea, but it gradually decreasing.

To diversify trading partners and reduce reliance on customary markets, the government is also practicing economic diplomacy like the FTA with the Philippines and the K-Silk Road initiative which is aimed at improving access to Central Asia. Accomplishments, however, are accompanied by structural roadblocks, including the fundamental challenges of a fast-aging population, rising social security costs, and narrow fiscal bandwidth which continue to impede economic sustainability. Thus, the military and economic conditions, precisely during the Yoon Suk-Yeol Era, have strategically aligned to support foreign policy, such as the choice to continue GSOMIA with Japan. While economic stability, even if tenuous at best, allows the government to uphold active regional and global diplomacy, the enhanced defense and security ties also offer a particular rationale for confronting regional threats.

CONCLUSION

The General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) and its modifications under President Yoon Suk-Yeol demonstrate an ease in the in diplomatic relations with Japan, which, in turn, supports South Korea's emergence as an Indo-Pacific power. The rational approach framework of foreign policy analyzes the effect of the domestic political environment, the international environment, as well as the prevailing economic and military conditions. Yoon embraced the controversial decision regarding GSOMIA with the exercise of his "strong presidential authority" in the quelling of domestic backlash revolving around the cooperation with the US and Japan. It is evident in whereby GSOMIA's swift normalization accords bolstered Yoon's and the domestic relevant political dynamics which encouraged the argumentation of his foreign policy, and thus reinforcing the discriminating policy toward Japan. The outcome Syria of the GSOMIA the benefits affirm the argument Suh supports Yoon's policy of named internal balancing in response to external pressures imposed upon South Korea.

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