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## China can play more active role in mediating Japan-South Korea spat

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### Editor's Note:

The brewing spat between Japan and South Korea after Seoul's withdrawal from the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) marks a new low in Seoul-Tokyo relations. What's driving Seoul's decision to withdraw from the pact? Will it cast a shadow on the US alliance system in East Asia? Moon Chung-in (**Moon**), special advisor for foreign affairs and national security to South Korean President **Moon Jae-in** and distinguished professor at Yonsei University, shared his insights with Global Times (**GT**) reporter Li Aixin on these issues during the Third Taihe Civilizations Forum held in Beijing in early September.

**GT: What are the main reasons for South Korea's withdrawal from the intelligence-sharing pact with Japan?**

**Moon:** Very simple. In early July, the Japanese government imposed export control against South Korea. In August, Japan demoted South Korea from the list of A-category countries to B-category countries (in trade). Japan took restrictive economic punishment against South Korea. Japan argued that it is imposing economic restrictions because it does not trust South Korea. Our government believes the GSOMIA cannot be implemented if Japan does not trust us. If Japan does not trust us, how can we exchange sensitive military intelligence with them?

**GT: Under the backdrop of the GSOMIA collapse and escalating tensions between South Korea and Japan, how do you think US alliance system in East Asia will develop?**

**Moon:** We usually call it the trilateral security cooperation and coordination among Washington, Tokyo and Seoul, because we do not have any military alliance with Japan.

Yes, it was true that in the past, the US intervened to narrow the differences between Seoul and Tokyo. For example, in 2015, when there was a conflict between the two countries over the comfort women issue, the Barack Obama administration intervened and narrowed differences so the two countries could reach an agreement on the issue.

However, the Trump administration did not intervene, and has said that it is a matter between Japan and South Korea. Maybe that is one reason why the conflict between Japan and South Korea became deeper.

**GT: Will the move affect the South Korea-US alliance?**

**Moon:** A lot of South Korean conservatives and Washington's mainstream (politicians) argue that South Korea's failure to renew GSOMIA will undermine the alliance. However, we should understand one thing that GSOMIA is between Japan and South Korea. The US has nothing to do with the agreement, even though it was the US which mediated Japan and South Korea to sign the agreement.

Furthermore, we have a Trilateral Information Sharing Arrangement (TISA) that involves US, Japan, and South Korea. So I don't think our decision not to renew the GSOMIA will affect the South Korea-US alliance negatively.

Washington must be very disappointed, because the US always wants Japan and South Korea to have close military cooperation and coordination, including the exchange of military information.

However, our government thinks the South Korea-US alliance is healthy. We have a mechanism to exchange information with Japan through US mediation.

**GT: Lately, observers say there might be some friction between South Korea and the US, since President Trump has been pushing for South Korea to pay more for US troops, while South Korea has recently pushed for a prompt return of US military bases in the country. Do you think such friction exists?**

**Moon:** Yes. The overall structure of South Korean-US alliance system remains intact. We have a defense treaty between South Korea and the US. We have a combined forces command between US and South Korea, and we have US troops in South Korea, and there is a relative strong support of US forces in South Korea and the alliance by South Korean people. We have been paying defense costs for US troops in the country. Therefore, from an overall structural point of view, the South Korea-US alliance remains intact.

But there are some pending issues that might need adjustment. For example, the Trump administration has been putting a lot of pressure on South Korea to increase defense costs. Last year, we agreed to pay \$1 billion for US forces. Now, the US is demanding that we pay about \$5 to \$6 billion. That's too much. This will lead to disputes between the US and South Korea.

Another issue is that the US just hinted it might need to set up bases for its intermediate range ballistic missiles in South Korea. But our government officially said no. That could become a future problem.

There's another issue, the so-called return of wartime operational control, which belongs to the US commander in South Korea, to South Korea. So far, everything is going well. But in the process, there could be some difference of opinion between Washington and Seoul. I believe that we will overcome those differences because alliance is a tool for enhancing our national interest.

The US has its national interests. South Korea has its national interests. From time to time, there can be differences in their priorities. Therefore, it is natural for us to have differences in terms of defining national interests. But I think we will adjust to the differences.

**GT: Will the differences between South Korea and the US bring Seoul and Pyongyang closer?**

**Moon:** It is important for **North Korea** and the US to have a more productive negotiation about the nuclear issue. If the US-North Korea relations get better, then there is a great chance for improved inter-Korean relations.

**GT:** After South Korean President Moon Jae-in assumed office, the crisis on the Korean Peninsula has been eased. But the fundamental problems remain, such as the distrust between Seoul and Pyongyang. After Kim-Trump summits, there have been few improvements on the Korean Peninsula issue. How do you think the situation on Korean Peninsula will further develop? What can relevant parties do to break the current stalemate?

**Moon:** The Korean Peninsula has gone through a roller-coaster pattern of interactions. 2017 was the year of crisis. 2019 was the year of great hope for peace. This year, we are facing precarious uncertainties. One of the reasons is the failure to reach an agreement in Hanoi between Trump and Chairman **Kim Jong-un** in February. On June 30, Trump and Kim met in Panmunjom. The two leaders agreed to resume working level talks within two to three weeks.

It was later discovered that the Trump agreed with Kim to suspend a South Korea-US joint military training exercise. But we continued with the exercise on a much smaller scale. North Korea considers this is a hostile activity against Pyongyang.

I think that is one reason why North Korea has not attended working level talks. But there is another factor, if North Korean officers show up at the talks, then North Korean officials should get some tangible outcomes. Apparently, they might have not read any such signs from the US. Therefore, they are not confident that the working level talks will produce very tangible outcomes, and those two reasons might have prevented North Korea from attending the working level talks.

**GT:** China-Japan-South Korea Trilateral Foreign Ministers' Meeting was held in Beijing. What role do you think can China play in mediating the conflicts between South Korea and Japan?

**Moon:** China can be an important mediator between Japan and South Korea. Up until now, the US played the role, but it is time for China to play that role, because cooperation among China, Japan, South Korea is extremely important for peace and stability, as well as the common prosperity in Northeast Asia. I hope China will play a more active role in narrowing the difference between Japan and South Korea, and I hope that China would take a more proactive diplomacy in promoting peace, stability, and common prosperity in Northeast Asia.

**GT:** This year marks the 70th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China. What do you think is the biggest change in China over the past 70 years?

**Moon:** It's an amazing transformation. Look at Chinese history. You won the war against the Kuomintang. Then you get into the Korean War (1950-53). After that there was a lot of chaos in China. You had a famine, and the **Cultural Revolution** (1967-77). From 1949 up until 1978 was rather gloomy. However, Deng Xiaoping's adoption of the Four Cardinal Principles in 1979 and the pursuit of reform and opening-up greatly transformed China.

China has gone through enormous transformation. China has become No.2 country in the world in terms of economic power. China is No.1 exporting country in the world. China is No.1 in terms of foreign exchange reserves. Now you're pushing the **Belt and Road** Initiative. The new China is a completely different China, nobody would have expected that kind of transformation. Therefore, I would say the last 70 years have been the greatest success story for China. Of course, success always brings new challenges.

The current trade conflict with the US might mirror that kind of new challenge. Also you have a lot of domestic problems, including growing inequality in China, environmental problems and resources problems. You have 56 different ethnic groups in China. Unity among diversity has become another big challenge. But as you transformed yourself in the past 70 years, I believe you will overcome those challenges so that you can celebrate the 100th anniversary of the founding of PRC in 2049. Maybe by then you might be able to achieve the Chinese Dream.