“The Importance of U.S.-Japan-Korea Trilateral Defense Cooperation”

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SPEAKER
The Honorable Randall Schriver
Assistant Secretary of Defense for Indo-Pacific Security Affairs,
U.S. Department of Defense

HOST
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Victor Cha: Our speaker this morning is Randy Schriver. Randy, as many of you know, is the assistant secretary of defense for Indo-Pacific security affairs. Prior to that, he previously served in various U.S. administrations as deputy assistant secretary of state for East Asian and Pacific affairs, and then prior to his civilian service he was also an active duty naval intelligence officer, including a deployment in support of Operation Desert Storm and Operation Desert Shield. He’s won numerous military and civilian awards. He’s an old, old friend, and really truly one of the best minds that we have today in Washington, D.C., indeed in the country, on Indo-Pacific affairs. So without further ado, let me introduce Assistant Secretary Schriver.

Randall Schriver: Thank you, Victor. And thank you to CSIS. It’s always good to return here and be here, but particularly when speaking of these subjects, because CSIS has done so much work, and quality work, on the alliance relationships with South Korea, and Japan, and the trilateral relationship as well. So thank you for hosting me, and providing this venue, and giving us the opportunity to have this discussion.

So I think we’re all aware this event takes place against a backdrop of some rising tension between Japan and South Korea. What I’d like to do today, though, is a few things: talk about the progress that we have made in our trilateral security partnership, talk about the future possibilities and what we can accomplish if we’re able to regain a spirit of trilateral cooperation, and then we also need to be frank about the downsides and the risks should tensions continue or even escalate.

So I’ll start by talking about the importance and the resilience of our bilateral alliances with Japan and South Korea, respectively. In our National Defense Strategy we, of course, identify our network of allies and partners as a crucial and durable asymmetric advantage in our long-term competition with Russia and China. Our alliances really are unique. And they’re more than force multipliers; they give us opportunities to train and improve our capabilities. They also give us opportunities to share burden alongside our partners and contribute to collective security.

In this context, Japan and South Korea are two of our most important allies. You know, we say that Japan is the cornerstone of security in the Indo-Pacific and our relationship with Korea is the linchpin. I’m sure we’re guilty from time to time of using these as mantras and not reflecting on the meaning, but these are carefully chosen words and they are meaningful, and they are in fact reflective of how we view these very important relationships.

Since 1953 the Republic of Korea has gone from a net security recipient to a regional security provider. And as we look beyond Northeast Asia to challenges of the future, we expect South Korea to be a major source of stability. Twenty-eight thousand five hundred U.S. military personnel and their families live and work in South Korea. Together with our Korean allies, we recently opened the U.S. Army Garrison Humphreys, now America’s largest overseas military facility. The Defense Department has agreed with the Republic of Korea – our Republic of Korea allies to accelerate the transition of wartime operational control to a Korean commander so that the ROK can lead its defense. But we continue to always go together – “katchi kapshida,” as we say.

Turning to Japan, it’s our largest overseas host of U.S. forces in the world; 55,000 U.S. servicemembers and their families call it home. With enhanced
interoperability and capabilities, we are reshaping U.S.-Japan alliance roles and missions, especially as Japan has evolved into a trusted partner and security partner for numerous countries in South and Southeast Asia.

The bilateral alliance with both of these countries is important to us, and deeper trilateral cooperation has allowed our three countries to take on the most challenging national security issues since World War II, from the challenges presented by the Soviet Union during the Cold War to the threat posed by North Korea to the emerging challenges that China presents as a global competitor.

Now, to speak a bit about the ROK-Japan relationship, if you just looked at a map you’d certainly understand the current security environment should make Japan and South Korea natural partners. They have shared values and are committed to a free and open order in the Indo-Pacific based on a rules-based international order. Both countries understand the long-term risks of a rising China and a China that is violating international norms on cyber, stealing intellectual property, aggressively and opaquely modernizing their military, while trying to change the geopolitical status quo by coercive diplomacy. Both understand a resurgent Russia that has its sights on returning to the Far East and Pacific theaters. Both understand that stability has enabled the region to thrive and achieve remarkable results. And both are concerned by the actions taken by authoritarian states such as China and Russia that undermine the rules-based order.

These areas of common understanding have been evident in the trilateral defense engagements we’ve had recently. The 11th Defense Trilateral Talks, which I had the opportunity to co-chair last May and was joined by Deputy Director General Ishikawa and Deputy Minister Chung, being an example of that. And even at the ministerial level on the margins of the Shangri-La Dialogue this year in late May/early June, former acting Secretary Shanahan had trilateral meetings with Minister Iwaya and Minister Jeong in Singapore. These venues are examples of enhanced coordination among the U.S., the ROK, and Japan, and our defense professionals, and allowed us to talk about common challenges and threats in the region as well as our response.

It is remarkable how quickly political disputes can push aside discussion of our cooperation and our future progress that our countries seek to accomplish. My colleague, Deputy Assistant Secretary Marc Knapper, said recently Korea and Japan each suffer consequences when their bilateral ties worsen, and each bears responsibility for improving them.

Historical disputes, animosities and political disagreements should be kept separate from shared vital military and security cooperation. We hope to see our security relationship insulated from political disputes and disagreement.

The United States strongly believes the integrity of our mutual defense and security ties must persist despite frictions in other areas of the ROK-Japan relationship. The United States has expressed our strong concern and disappointment that the Moon administration has withheld its renewal of the General Security of Military Information Agreement with Japan, or GSOMIA. The United States has repeatedly made clear to the Moon administration that this decision would have a negative effect, not only in the bilateral relationship with Japan, but on U.S. security interests and those of other friends and allies.
We emphasize the only winners when Japan and Korea feud are our competitors. We only have to look at the recent joint patrol by Russian and Chinese aircraft as a direct challenge to our three countries in an attempt to take advantage of the current frictions in relations.

Seoul’s decision reflects their frustration with efforts to resolve their trade and economic disputes with Japan, but we are concerned it may reflect serious misapprehension on the part of the Moon administration regarding the serious security challenges we face in Northeast Asia.

So it is critical now more than ever to ensure that there are strong and close relations between and among our three countries. In the face of shared challenges posed by the DPRK, China and Russia, we cannot overstate this point. There’s simply too much at stake.

We have endured similar challenges before, and yet have always been able to move forward towards our common goals and to meet the shared regional and global challenges. This time is no different. To that end, we seek to promote a forward-looking ROK-Japan relationship and will continue to pursue bilateral and trilateral security cooperation where possible with Japan and the Republic of Korea.

So what are we doing? I want to focus on a few things that we are doing shoulder to shoulder with our partners, including in trilateral work. I was recently able to accompany our new Secretary Esper on his first overseas trip as secretary of defense. We visited both the Republic of Korea and Japan, as well as Mongolia, Australia and New Zealand. His predecessor, incidentally, Secretary Mattis, also made his first overseas trip as secretary to the Indo-Pacific. This is truly our priority theater, and it’s reflected in actions on the part of our senior leadership.

Secretary Esper is committed to ensuring the United States, with its allies and partners, are prepared to safeguard the rules and norms that we all enjoy in the Indo-Pacific region. The secretary is especially aware of the important roles Korea and Japan play in maintaining regional stability, which is why he chose to visit both Seoul and Tokyo on his first trip.

The United States, South Korea and Japan are committed to the final fully verified denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, as agreed to by Chairman Kim in Singapore. Together we offer North Korea a brighter path and a bright economic future for his country and his people, should he make that decision to implement his previous commitments.

Japan hosts the Enforcement Coordination Cell, a command center of eight countries, which includes the Republic of Korea, Japan, France, and our so-called Five Eyes partners, who are all committed to enforcing U.N. Security Council resolutions that prohibit North Korea’s ability to unlawfully export coal and import refined petroleum in the maritime domain.

This instrumental effort, which we call Partnerships with Purpose, is a daily reminder that international community takes its obligations seriously and that sanctions will continue until North Korea comes into compliance with its international obligations and the agreement made at Singapore with President
Trump. All parties want a stable and permanent peace on the Korean Peninsula, and we are committed to getting there. It is critical that this cooperation continue between Japan and South Korea.

We demonstrate our commitment through a series of transparent bilateral training events designed for common defense. And in addition we conduct trilateral security training with Japan and South Korea. We’ve recently held Trilateral Chiefs of Defense meetings, or Tri-CHOD, as we call it, as well as trilateral conversations on a broad range of intelligence matters. The most recently Tri-CHOD meeting occurred in October of 2018. Furthermore, our trilateral relationship is looking beyond challenges in Northeast Asia. The trilateral defense relationship is well positioned to deepen cooperation on global security issues if there’s a willingness by all parties to continue to do so.

For instance, Japan and South Korea are both active participants in the Proliferation Security Initiative. Both are also leaders of PSI’s Asia-Pacific exercise rotation, which works to enhance capability and political will across the Indo-Pacific to conduct interdictions of weapons of mass destruction delivery systems and related materials. Furthermore, both participated in the ROK-hosted Eastern Endeavor exercise in July and Japan hosted the 2018 Asia-Pacific exercise rotation event.

While Japan and Korea continue to pledge significant support and actively cooperate with us to counter terrorism and violent extremism, both work to prevent piracy in the Indian Ocean. Both work to improve health security in Southeast Asia and Africa through global health security agendas. Both work to promote human rights. Both contribute to economic development around the world and both assist victims of conflict and natural disaster.

The United States has made a commitment to both countries and we will honor those commitments. While we have a long way ahead, I believe we can and will surpass these challenging times. We have made substantial effort and engagement at very senior levels, although we don’t always talk about that publicly and what we do behind the scenes. But now is a time for action on the part of both parties. Again, as Secretary Knapper said, both bear the costs and both bear the responsibilities to improve the relations.

In the immediate near term, we do call on the Republic of Korea to recommit to GSOMIA and to renew that agreement, and we also call on both sides to participate in meaningful dialogue to address their differences. Meaningful dialogue means coming to the table with a mindset of problem solving, not with a mindset of airing grievances further.

In Northeast Asia and the Indo-Pacific region and the world will be safer when the United States, Japan, and South Korea work together in solidarity. Our three countries are resilient, and we share common security objectives and our trilateral defense cooperation has withstood the test of time to meet our security challenges and will do so in the future should we – all three countries commit to it.

So with that, I look forward to your questions, comments, criticisms, and, Dr. Cha, thanks again for the time and look forward to the Q&A. Thanks.
Great. Is this on? Can you hear me? Thanks. Thanks so much, Randy, for those
great comments. As you can imagine, there's been a lot of talk in Washington about
what's happened over the past week or so. I thought what we'd do is I'd ask you
just a couple of questions and then we'll open it up to the audience for some
broader discussion.

The first thing I wanted to ask you is that in your remarks you repeated what the
State Department has also said, which is this phrase "a strong concern and
disappointment" at the decision to terminate GSOMIA. To the extent that you can
say, to what extent was the U.S. government consulted on this? Did you know
about it? Was it a surprise? Just curious.

Well, it was certainly a point of discussion including during Secretary Esper’s visit
to Seoul and Tokyo, as I mentioned. I would say those discussions would constitute
consultation, but in terms of the actual decision to not renew we were not
forewarned. And so that decision itself I don't believe we had a forewarning of.

I see. OK. And then I think maybe for the benefit of the audience and everybody
who's watching at home, GSOMIA – you know, we know of it as sort of this
information-sharing intelligence-sharing agreement. But perhaps you could sort of
enlighten us on exactly, you know, technically what is considered to be so useful
and valued about that agreement for the United States. Like, if North Korea does
something, what is it that GSOMIA enables the United States to do that it would not
be able to do without GSOMIA?

Well, I would say that it's helpful to the United States – valuable to the United States
– but, primarily, it's helpful to Japan and Korea themselves. GSOMIA is an
agreement through which they can share information directly – sensitive
intelligence information – and do so in a timely way, as fast as technology can move
information. And so in the complex security environment we're in oftentimes time
is of the essence. And so when you're looking at potential missile launches or
you're looking at other activity, you don't want a cumbersome, unwieldy process of
information sharing, which is what we had before, with us in the middle passing
information back and forth between the two parties but not between one another.

I say it's important to Japan and the Republic of Korea beyond our own interests
because there may even be situations where we're not directly impacted but
they're operating in the same environment and they would benefit from sharing
information. For example, the counter-piracy operations. Should the ROK get
information about a threat to a Japan aircraft, they don't need us in the middle
sharing that information, again, when time is of the essence. And vice versa. If
Japan were to have some information that would be valuable to the ROK. So it does
impact our security interests, and potentially adds risk to our forces, particularly
on the Korean Peninsula. But I would say it's broader than that.

And so there was a previous agreement, right, in – what was it – 2014?

Fourteen.

Was it ‘14? Called – what was it – the trilateral information sharing agreement. So
what's the difference between that and then this GSOMIA agreement?
Randall Schriver: Yeah. At the most basic level, the previous agreement has us in the middle as the intermediary. So it did provide a mechanism for sharing information and intelligence, but only through us. So if the Republic of Korea provided us information, we could share it with Japan and vice versa, but not directly.

Victor Cha: Right. So I've heard – so some commentary on this has been that, well, without GSOMIA we still have TISA. And TISA serves the same purpose as GSOMIA. But that's actually not true, right? I mean, there is – there is a substantive difference in terms of the way the arrangement is.

Randall Schriver: It's more cumbersome and unwieldy. And in the security environment we're operating in, there's added risk without GSOMIA.

Victor Cha: Yeah. And so, going to the security environment, I noticed in your remarks you – I think what you said was misapprehension of security threats. There's been a lot of activity in the region lately, you know, foremost of which have been, what, the seven sets of missile tests by North Korea. I guess the first question is, you know, in your – what do you think they're doing with these seven – like, what are they – are they – is this a political statement, or are they actually trying to improve certain capabilities with this testing? And I'm getting to your – addressing your point about misapprehension. Do you see an asymmetry in the way our allies are looking at, broadly, the security region, but in particular these last seven sets of short-range missile tests?

Randall Schriver: So, I would probably benefit from hearing your thoughts on North Korea more than my own, given your substantial experience and expertise. But it seems to me that these aren't mutually exclusive. These can be – these tests can be for the purposes of political maneuvering, but it can also be critical steps in their modernization, their development of these systems. Perhaps they're trying to gain leverage before another round of talks. Chairman Kim, of course, at the Panmunjom meeting did commit to restarting working-level talks. So, there could be a variety of explanations. I think the bottom line is it means from a defense perspective that they are improving, and that the security environment is getting more challenging.

I would say among defense professionals, and in our discussions with military representatives we have great alignment on our view of the security environment and the growing threat from North Korea. I can't speak to how political leaders might view things, but it does appear that this decision puts a place of prominence on domestic politics ahead of the security environment that, again, we feel we're very aligned with on – defense officials and representatives.

Victor Cha: And then not must on North Korea but more broadly in the region, when you look at our two allies, do you see essential alignment on – you mentioned, you know, China and South China Sea, some of these other things. Do you see alignment there between our two allies, or is there some gaps in the way –

Randall Schriver: I see a lot more alignment than gaps. I mean, obviously there'll be nuanced differences on certain issues. But on the – on the big strategic questions of the day I see more alignment than not.

Victor Cha: OK. And then, just moving over just to the – to North Korea and the
alliance questions. I guess the first question I had, so you've just finished an exercise in South Korea which apparently the North Koreans were not happy with. What is the future of exercising right now? Is there – has there been a policy on this? I mean, I know what happened in August as, I understand, a scaled-down version of what normally would take place in sort of the late summer/early fall. But usually we have a bunch of exercises in the fall and then the big one in the spring. Are there any decisions that have been made about that? Is that a topic that’s actually discussed with not just the South Koreans but also the North Koreans?

Randall Schriver: Well, certainly we speak to South Korea about it. You know, President Trump made a decision in Singapore to direct us to modify the way we exercise on the peninsula. Really, I think, as a gesture of goodwill, and try to create more space for diplomacy. What we’ve been able to do in consultation with South Korea is develop a modified approach to training that still allows us to train against all the mission-essential tasks, keep readiness at a high level. And, you know, at the end of the day, what you really want to stress and test is how decisions get made in a crisis-like environment in a combined decision-making command. And we’re able to do that through computer-simulated scenarios.

We’re able to do that really quite low-key. It’s basically senior military leaders in a room simulating that combined decision making. So we feel confident that we’re at a place where we can maintain readiness and, again, train on all the mission-essential tasks, while giving the diplomats space should the talks resume and should North Korea come to the table with a real sense of purpose that they want to reach their commitment of denuclearization.

Victor Cha: And then on the trilateral piece, I mean, could you say something about what is the agenda going forward in terms of trilateral coordination, exercising, on what issues, and what the response has been thus far from the Japanese and the South Koreans?

Randall Schriver: Sure. So they would largely – they historically, and I would expect going forward, largely center around where we have shared concerns. So missile defense is an obvious one. But increasingly things like anti-submarine warfare, the full range of maritime security issues. And remember, alongside our trilateral training and our multilateral training – where all three countries are present – we have real-world ongoing operations. I mentioned Japan’s hosting of the coordination cell to enforce the sanctions against North Korea. We have U.S.-Japan-ROK participating that – participating in that operation, alongside other countries. But we’re all there, committed to sanctions enforcement and operating alongside one another.

Victor Cha: OK. And I’m going to open it up to the audience in a minute, but I can’t – I feel like I have to ask you this question. So you were part of the original negotiating team that – before Singapore, right? You didn’t go – did you go to Singapore?

Randall Schriver: I did.

Victor Cha: You went to Singapore. So what was that like?

Randall Schriver: Well, it was historic. You know, out of all the things that I thought would be unlikely
in my tenure, I wouldn’t have expected a summit-level meeting. You know, you and I have been at this for a while. And I’ve seen a lot of different things tried. We’ve seen four parties. We’ve seen six parties. We’ve seen isolation and neglect. So I think, given the decision-making process, as we understand it, in North Korea, it was certainly worth the attempt to engage at the leader level and see if that’s productive.

You know, the first time ever we’ve gotten Chairman Kim in a written joint statement saying he’s committed to these things. And we’ve had some progress, for example, on the return of remains of our missing personnel. We haven’t seen the progress we want to see on the core issue that we’re concerned about, denuclearization. But we’ll stay at it. But it was quite historic, and a remarkable scene.

Victor Cha: Yeah. I can only imagine.

OK. So we will now open it up to the audience. I ask that you wait for the microphone from our teams to get to you, that you state your name and your affiliation. And that — and I implore you to ask a question. We don’t need short speeches this morning, OK, because we already had a short speech. So we’ll go here to Dimitri, yes. Yeah, the mics are coming to you, OK.

Dimitri: Good morning. Dimitri, Financial Times.

Randy, you didn’t mention the move by Japan to remove South Korea from its whitelist. How important was that? How concerned were you about that? And do you think there was a national-security justification?

And just a side question: Is there any work being done on the remains in North Korea at the moment, or has that been halted for the time being?

Randall Schriver: So there are a lot of things we could talk about. I stayed solidly in our lane. At the Defense Department we’re mostly concerned about how defense relations can be impacted. But certainly what’s been done on each side on the export-control issue has contributed to the rise in tensions.

I was saying earlier the first rule of holes is when you’re in one, stop digging. We need each side to stop doing things that contribute to more tension and start to develop the mindset of how are we going to be problem solvers? How are we going to get out of this fix?

So the economic decisions certainly contributed to the rising tensions. But, you know, what we’re concerned about at the Department of Defense is that this has now bled over into security issues, which is of great concern.

On the remains, we have remained in communication with North Korea. It’s our belief that they have more — that they hold more remains that they could return at any time, make a unilateral return, as they did with the 55 box sets last summer. And, by the way, we’re continuing to make progress with identifying our service members from those box sets. We just recently made another announcement.
So we think there are remains that they could return at any moment, and we’re open to receiving them. What we really want to do, though, is resume joint recovery operations, which have been suspended for quite some time. We’ve made a proposal to North Korea on doing just that, given the weather. And where we need to do those operations, probably the earliest we could start would now be next spring. But they have a proposal from us. And given the commitment that was made in Singapore, we would hope that they would receive that favorably and begin the joint recovery operations.

Victor Cha: And can you say if the – so the – so this is ancient history, but in 2007 I actually brought back a set of remains with Bill Richardson, the first ones in quite some time. And it’s very clear to me that the North Koreans and the KPA, you know, want to continue this operation.

One of the – maybe this is getting too much in the weeds for all of you, but one of the issues has always been, in terms of the joint recovery operations, whether they determine where the excavations can take place or whether we can ask. And so I’m curious, since it’s your proposal – and maybe you’re not allowed – if you can’t speak about it, just say so – it’s your proposal, does that have to do with areas that we would like to go or areas that they have already sort of set aside and say these are the areas that we’re going to work on?

Randall Schriver: It’s even more basic than that. It’s trying to seek agreement to resume those operations, which would entail a discussion between our two sides –

Victor Cha: I see. OK.

Randall Schriver: – as to where we would. We’re certainly prepared to identify the priority areas that we’d like to search. This works in a variety of ways, depending on the country in which we’re operating. I would say probably our best – arguably our best partner in this has been Vietnam. And we get tremendous access there, and we assist in recovery of their remains when we find them. And we would certainly do the same in North Korea. There are certainly remains of North Korean missing service members. And in the joint recovery operations, we would not only seek to identify our service members but help them identify theirs as well.

Victor Cha: Thank you. Next question. Yes, we’ll go to this side of the room. Wait for the mic, please.


Randall Schriver: Good to see you.

Jungahn Kim: My question is, you know, our Prime Minister Lee actually said a couple of days ago that South Korea is willing to reconsider the termination of GSOMIA, if and when Japan retracts its economic retaliation against South Korea. I wonder where the U.S. stands in this. Is the U.S. now willing to maybe play a more active role in terms of mediating the tension between the two countries to reduce the tension?

And the third question is, at what point the U.S. was informed about Japan’s decision to put the retaliation against South Korea? Was the U.S. prewarned or pre-
informed about Japan’s decision – you know, decision to actually eliminate South Korea from its whitelist? At what point? That would be my second question.

Randall Schriver: So on the first question, as I said, we have been active in our diplomacy. And we don’t always talk about that. You know, it’s not always constructive to publicly acknowledge we’re addressing these very sensitive issues. So I expect we’ll continue to engage in that diplomacy. Sometimes it’ll be visible and other times it may not be.

I would be careful about the wording, though. To be a mediator entails both sides wanting you to mediate, not – sometimes they want our involvement, but generally they want us to go explain to the other side why they’re wrong.

So, you know, I think our approach is going to be to keep both sides, to the extent possible, forward looking and not looking in reverse or looking at the current tensions, because we have important security challenges. The most strategic challenges we face are unfolding competition with China and the efforts of authoritarian states in the Indo-Pacific to undermine the rules-based order. These are things we all need to be working on; and so keep both Seoul and Tokyo forward looking as they try to find the modalities to work through their differences.

And I’m not in the discussions all the time about economic matters, so I can’t answer your second question.

Victor Cha: Thanks. Yes, right here. Right here in the front, in the – right here in the front with the –

Ri Ta-Chen: Ri Ta-Chen with Radio Free Asia. Randy, nice to see you again.

It has been reported China has denied a U.S. naval warship to visit Qingdao. I’m wondering, would you like to confirm that? If so, does United States have plan B, such as doing its port visit to other allies in the region? Thank you.

Randall Schriver: Sure. So the engagement we have with the PLA involves a range of activities, including port calls. We did recently receive word that it was inconvenient for them to host a previously planned port call to Qingdao. We’ll see if that can be rescheduled. Or in the case of this particular ship, there will be other ports of call. You know, we’ll compensate for that.

Going forward, you know, we want a U.S.-China mil-to-mil relationship that plays a stabilizing role in the overall relationship. We need in particular more work on enhancing the safety of operations in the Indo-Pacific, so confidence-building measures, ways to talk operator to operator so that we can develop appropriate rules of the road and safety protocols so that we reduce the chance of an accident or mishap.

But we are concerned with a number of issues right now, and we’ve spoken a lot about General Secretary Xi Jinping breaking his pledge to not militarize the South China Sea. So that remains a concern. We certainly have an eye on the situation in Hong Kong; a number of things we’re watching closely.

Victor Cha: Yes.

I’d like to follow up on a previous question about the U.S. role going forward. Given the stakes, the increased risk to U.S. personnel, you made clear and the administration has said it doesn’t want to play a mediating role. But might the administration – do you plan to send a senior-level official, a Cabinet-level official, to Japan and South Korea to try to persuade the Moon administration to reverse its decision? Is there something more you plan to do other than call on the two sides to patch things up?

Randall Schriver: Well, to be clear, we have had Cabinet-level engagement. Secretary Esper was there earlier this month. Ambassador Bolton was in the region and visited both capitals, I think within the month. So I would anticipate similar engagement. Whether or not, you know, we would sort of publicly have an envoy for the stated purpose of this agreement, I’m not aware of a plan to do that. But I think our concerns are great enough that we’re – you know, we’re open to a range of possibilities if it’s constructive and useful.

Again, to be constructive, the mindset has to be right on both sides, Seoul and Tokyo, and for them to genuinely want us in that role rather than siding with one or the other. So this is a work in progress, but I think we’re open to possibilities if, in fact, they, you know, could potentially help improve the situation.

Victor Cha: Can I just – so let me just press a little bit. So, Randy – so based on your comments today, your written remarks and then your responses, it’s pretty clear that the U.S. government position is call on South Korea to renew or return to GSOMIA. Is that – is that a fair characterization?

Randall Schriver: Yes.

Victor Cha: Yeah. And then – but then on the whitelist, is there a stated U.S. policy on the whitelist? And you know, I know that’s not in your lane so you may not be able to comment on that, but have you heard of any stated policy by the U.S. on the whitelist aspect of it? Yeah.

Randall Schriver: Yeah, I mean, look, these are sovereign decisions that both countries are taking, and in every case we can’t second guess, you know, the merits of the case. But it certainly appears that these are politically motivated and we’re in a spiral of tit-for-tat kinds of moves.

I think the position on the whitelist would be to have the two sides sit down for meaningful dialogue and come to some agreement on that. I mean, I think our preference would be that they, in fact, do remove one another and return to a more normal trading relationship, but there are technical details associated with those lists and that has to be worked out across the table.


Insun Kang: Hi. I’m Insun Kang with The Chosun Ilbo, Korean newspaper.
If GSOMIA is terminated from November 22nd, what kind of additional risks do you expect to see politically and militarily?

Randall Schriver: I'll focus on the military risks. Again, if after 22 November the agreement is terminated, it means that the ability to share information and intelligence among the three parties becomes more cumbersome and unwieldy. And in the security environment we're operating in, that adds risk and is sub-optimal. You know, there are -- I could get into specific scenarios and possible operations where that could come into effect, but I'd rather leave it at a general level and say, you know, when you're looking at challenges ranging from ballistic missiles to cyberspace, all these things, we're much better off when we're removing obstacles and facilitating exchange of information, not making it more difficult.

Victor Cha: Yes, in the -- in the back left there? So while Jane is going to the gentleman for the question, let me just -- so, I mean -- I mean, to the extent there is a silver lining the silver lining is that there still is some time, right? There is still some time for these two sides to get together, whether it's on, you know, mutual or shared studies of the whitelist question or on any of these other issues. There still are a few months left for something to be done before any of this kicks in, although the whitelist restrictions have already kicked in. There still is some time in that regard. Not a lot of time, but there is some, so.

Randall Schriver: Correct.

Victor Cha: Yeah. Yes?


As a follow up to the previous question, what impact do you see on the ability for U.S. defense industry to provide defense articles or provide tech transfer to South Korea following the GSOMIA pullout?

Randall Schriver: I'm not aware of any direct implications, but I'd maybe have to look into that further. You know, we have a very robust alliance with the ROK that has been in place for decades, and even with tensions between the ROK and Japan we intend on sustaining that and enhancing that and improving that. And security cooperation is a part of that. They have made substantial investments in U.S. equipment, and we're happy to see that not only because it's good for industry but because it helps with interoperability and it helps the overall capability of the alliance. So we do hope to work through -- see the two sides work through these tensions, but certainly our respective bilateral relations, we'll continue to attend to them and try to keep them as strong as possible in the meantime.

Victor Cha: Yes, right here in the front, Gil? And this will probably be the last question. So, Gil.


Was there advice to President Trump to meet – try to create a triangular relationship at the G-20? And was there any reaction to the fact Abe did not want to meet with Moon, and that the U.S. anticipated the downward spiral and the president has a role in dealing with this? Or is this really not involving the president right now?
Victor Cha: And just – so on this, I mean, one of the interesting things prior to the whitelist and GSOMIA was that the polling was actually very interesting in the two countries, because at least some of the polling I saw of South Korea, while relations were not good because, you know, the Moon government canceled the 2015 comfort women agreement, the Koreans didn't like Abe’s August 15th speech, overall the polling of the South Korean public was actually not that negative – more negative than normal, I guess – against Japan. Where the big change was, of course, was in Japan, right? Public opinion polling in Japan had turned quite definitively negative against South Korea. So, of course, it’s all changed with, you know, this recent tit for tat, but I thought that was – that was an interesting view of the situation on the ground. So, please.

Randall Schriver: I don’t know what may have been recommended to President Trump. I don’t have any information about that related to the G-20. So I think he has substantial and frequent engagement with both Prime Minister Abe and President Moon. But I’m not aware of any particular proposal or what might have been presented before the G-20.

Victor Cha: But it would be – I mean, and, again, you don’t have to comment on this – but it would – I mean, if the common ally, the United States, in this case at the highest levels, were to encourage – or make statements or encourage or give the speech that you just gave, I mean, presumably that would give both leaders some more political space to operate in. They’ve both kind of really worked themselves in corners that it’s hard for them to get out of. But, again, you don’t – you don’t have to comment on that.

Again, I know you’ve just come back from travels. You’re about to head off for more travels. We really appreciate your coming by and talking about this very important topic. As you can see by the turnout, everybody really wanted to hear what you had to say on this. So, Randy, thank you, again.

Randall Schriver: Thank you.

(END)