

U.S. Ambassador Skips Annual Defense Forum

Cho Yi-jun

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U.S. Ambassador to Korea Harry Harris is skipping an annual defense forum in Seoul that normally attracts senior U.S. officials for a junket in the Maldives, apparently still sore about a dressing-down he was given by the Foreign Ministry here last week.

Harris, who does not hold any alternative position, is skipping the Seoul Defense Dialogue under the aegis of the Defense Ministry to give a speech at the Indian Ocean Conference in the Maldives on Tuesday and Wednesday, according to a tweet he sent Sunday.

Relations between Korea and the U.S. are increasingly strained since Seoul decided to scrap an intelligence-sharing pact with Japan. It is unusual for Washington not to send any key official to the forum, which marks its eighth anniversary later this week. It has usually been attended by an assistant secretary of defense or similar official from Washington.

But Washington informed Seoul that Randall Schriver, the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Indo-Pacific Security Affairs, will not attend this year's event because of his "busy schedule."

Immediately after being summoned by the Foreign Ministry for what was billed as a "private conversation" on Aug. 28, a peeved Harris canceled appearances at a couple of security-related events here. At the meeting with Harris, Vice Foreign Minister Cho Sei-young urged U.S. officials to "refrain" from publicly criticizing Seoul's decision to scrap the intelligence-sharing pact with Tokyo.

Prof. Park Young-june at Korea National Defense University said, "The balance that Washington has maintained between Seoul and Tokyo seems to be now getting tipped towards its alliance with Tokyo since Seoul's decision not to renew the pact."

Meanwhile, there is heated debate in America about the U.S.-Korea joint drills after U.S. President Donald Trump said they are a "complete waste of money."

Doug Bandow, a senior fellow at the U.S. think tank Cato Institute questioned of having the U.S. soldiers deployed in South Korea. "The point is that South Korea is so dramatically far developed over the North, there is no need for U.S. troops. It is South Korea that should provide the troops, the manpower, the material. Yes, the U.S. as a deterrent effect but there's no reason for the U.S. to do that. More countries are able to defend themselves," he said.

But Evans Revere at the State Department's Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs said, "This is not a waste of money. This is an important investment, developed over many decades, and it has helped maintain peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula."