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US and South Korea hold war games ahead of talks

The massive annual US-South Korean war games known as Foal Eagle and Key Resolve began last week. The drills, which were delayed to allow North Korea to participate in last month's Winter Olympics in South Korea, take place amid continuing high tensions on the Korean Peninsula.

The exercises, which usually last two months, will run for just one month and not involve key US strategic assets, such as an aircraft carrier strike group, nuclear submarines and nuclear-capable bombers. The lower-key approach follows the announcement of talks between North Korean leader Kim Jong-un and South Korean President Moon Jae-in this month, and between Kim and US President Donald Trump, possibly in May.

While the Pentagon, as it ritually does, said the exercises have a “defensive character,” they are a barely-disguised rehearsal for war with North Korea. Foal Eagle will involve 11,500 American troops and about 300,000 South Korean troops, backed by heavy armour, artillery and war planes. Key Resolve is a two-week, computer-based command-and-control exercise involving 12,000 US and 10,000 South Korean troops.

There is nothing defensive about these war games. They are premised on OPLAN 5015, agreed by the US and South Korea in 2015, that involves pre-emptive strikes on North Korea and “decapitation raids” to kill its top leaders.

Moreover, while so-called strategic assets will not be involved, a US Navy Expeditionary Strike Group (ESG) will take part in a joint landing exercise at Pohang in South Korea. The ESG features the USS Wasp, an amphibious assault ship that supports a Marine

expeditionary unit, helicopters and short take-off/vertical landing F-35B fighter aircraft. The strike group includes three guided missile destroyers.

Designed for rapid deployment, the ESP features a squadron of six F-35Bs—the Marine variant of the fifth-generation fighter. The squadron is the first that has been “forward deployed”—that is, in a potential or actual war zone.

North Korea’s response to the joint war games has been muted, despite protests against the recent sale of hi-tech weapons to South Korea. After South Korean officials took delivery of the first of 46 F-35A fighters in late March, the North Korean state media declared that the purchase “gets in the way of the ongoing peace momentum” and “dialogue and confrontation can never co-exist at the same time.”

Nevertheless, North Korea has not issued strident denunciations of the joint exercises or carried out any drills of its own. During last year’s war games, North Korea launched several medium-range ballistic missiles that splashed down off the coast of Japan. This year, Pyongyang indicated it will not object to the joint exercises and not conduct further testing of its nuclear weapons or missiles prior to talks.

North and South Korean officials last week agreed that the summit between Kim and Moon would take place on April 27 in the truce village of Panmunjom in the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) that divides the peninsula. It is only the third summit between top Korean leaders—the others were held in 2000 and 2007. A further meeting of officials from the two Koreas on Thursday finalised protocols and security arrangements.

A South Korean presidential spokesman told the media this week that Moon’s top priorities would be “denuclearisation and sustained peace.” According to the South Korean press, one possibility under discussion is a joint statement at the conclusion of the summit committing North Korea to denuclearisation ahead of talks between Kim and Trump in May.

South Korea has made symbolic gestures aimed at creating the appearance of eased tensions on the Korean Peninsula. The latest involved sending a group of musicians, including K-pop stars Red Velvet, to Pyongyang where they entertained North Korean officials, including Kim and his wife, last Sunday.

However, the prospects of a nuclear deal to end the danger of a calamitous war in North East Asia remain slim. Trump, who is a bitter critic of the 2015 nuclear agreement with Iran, has insisted that North Korea must abandon its nuclear and missile programs and allow for an ever-more intrusive inspection regime—that is, complete North Korean capitulation. His bellicose threats, including at the UN, where he warned of the “total

destruction” of North Korea, have only driven Pyongyang to accelerate the development of a nuclear arsenal.

Trump’s appointment of John Bolton as his national security adviser suggests that the US views any talks with North Korea as the means for staging a provocation that will provide the pretext for war. Bolton, who is notorious for his advocacy of bombing Iran and North Korea to stop the supposed nuclear threat, wrote a comment in the *Wall Street Journal* in February setting out a pseudo-legal case for a pre-emptive attack on North Korea.

The lack of preparations for a Trump-Kim summit also demonstrates that there is no commitment on Washington’s part to end the confrontation with North Korea. Analyst Victor Cha explained in an interview with MSNBC this week: “Usually, you want the summit to come at the end, after you’ve had a year of negotiations.” He warned that the talks could lead to an angry walk-out that would mean “there’s no place left to go, there’s no more diplomacy.”

The White House blocked Cha’s appointment as US ambassador to South Korea earlier this year after the former Bush administration official was critical of Trump’s plans for a pre-emptive military strike on North Korea. There is currently no US ambassador in Seoul. In addition, there is only an acting assistant secretary of state for East Asia, and Mike Pompeo’s installation as secretary of state has yet to be confirmed.

As a result, Trump’s National Security Council, not the State Department, has been given the leading role in organising the summit with Kim, with other agencies, including the CIA and Pentagon, giving inputs. The South Korean newspaper *Hankyoreh* reported that working-level talks between US and North Korean intelligence agencies have already taken place about the summit. Bolton, who takes over as national security adviser on Tuesday, will thus be in a prime position to derail any talks, which he has criticised repeatedly as worthless.