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US, Japan conclude massive war games targeting China

The United States, Japan and Canada this week concluded provocative war games throughout military installations in Japan and the western Pacific. Washington and Tokyo used the biennial exercises, known as Keen Sword, to menace China and make clear that preparations for war are intensifying.

The drills began on October 29 and ended on November 8. They involved some 57,000 troops, including 47,000 Japanese Self-Defense Forces personnel, or one-fifth of Japan's total military, alongside 10,000 US Marines, airmen and sailors. The total amounted to an increase of 11,000 troops from the last time the exercises were held in 2016. In addition, Canada, sent a frigate and a supply ship, participating in the drills for the first time. Observers from Britain, France, Australia and South Korea also took part.

According to Lt. General Jerry Martinez, who leads US Forces Japan, this year's war games were the "largest and most complex" joint exercises conducted by the two nations, featuring amphibious assault, anti-submarine and ballistic missile system drills. The US's largest warship in Asia, the nuclear-powered USS Ronald Reagan aircraft carrier from the Seventh Fleet, played a prominent role in the exercises.

US and Japanese military officials claimed Keen Sword was aimed at providing stability in the Asia-Pacific. Rear Admiral Karl Thomas, from the aircraft carrier's strike group, stated: "We are here to stabilize, and preserve our capability should it be needed. Exercises like Keen Sword are exactly the kind of thing we need to do."

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In reality, the US military's presence in the region and such war games are being used to threaten and pressure China to acquiesce to Washington's demands as the US seeks to offset its relative economic decline. The Trump administration's trade war measures against Beijing are another aspect of this drive.

Michael Kovrig, senior advisor at the International Crisis Group, last month noted that Donald Trump may "be attempting to put more pressure on China on multiple fronts in order to gain negotiating leverage on trade. If so, this kind of linkage between issues is a risky tactic that could backfire by deepening the rift between the US and China."

Furthermore, the Trump administration has carried out a growing number of provocative "freedom of navigation" operations around Chinese-controlled islands in the South China Sea, and twice sent warships through the Taiwan Strait this year, most recently in October. This coincides with increased military collaboration with Taiwan—which China regards as a renegade province—US efforts to draw North Korea into its orbit, raising the possibility of US troops on China's border, and the exploitation of ethnic tensions in regions of China like Xinjiang.

Japanese remilitarization has been a part of this agenda. During Keen Sword, Japan deployed its new Amphibious Rapid Deployment Brigade (ARDB). Trained by the US Marine Corps, the ARDB was activated in April and is the first standing marine brigade Japan has operated since World War II. During the exercises, the ARDB engaged in drills to seize islands, alongside US marines on Guam and nearby Tinian.

Tokyo portrays the ARDB and the drills as necessary for "island defense" as the dispute with Beijing over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands in the East China Sea remains unresolved. Yet, these tensions were deliberately enflamed in recent years following Tokyo's purchase of three of the five uninhabited islands in 2012 and the Obama administration's assertion that the US-Japan Security Treaty extended to the disputed islands, legitimizing Tokyo's claims. The Trump administration has reiterated this position.

The ballistic missile drills are another aspect of war planning, as US strategy would involve attacks on China's military installations to eliminate Beijing's ability to use its relatively small nuclear arsenal. As a result, a US-instigated war could force China to retaliate with a nuclear strike, rather than risk losing the capacity to do so. The true reason for the expanding ballistic missile system in the Asia-Pacific, which includes THAAD (Terminal High-Altitude Area Defense) and Aegis Ashore batteries, is to prevent a Chinese counter-attack on US bases.

Canada's involvement in Keen Sword demonstrates the desire of other imperialist powers to exploit the US-China conflict for their own gains. Ottawa's defense attaché in Japan, Captain Hugues Canuel, said Canada's participation for the first time in Keen Sword moved the bilateral drills "into the realm of multilateral exercises" while expressing Canada's desire to have a military presence in Asia.

The war games are another step toward a dangerous global conflict. Along these lines, Tokyo and Washington are in talks to develop coordinated military responses over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, to be completed by March 2019. Based on the Bilateral Planning Mechanism developed under the 2015 security guidelines approved by the Abe and Obama governments, these plans could include military strikes should Chinese fisherman land on the islands, according to Japanese government sources.

The expanded exercises are a further indication that Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's trip to China last month and the recent thaw in relations between Tokyo and Beijing by no means signals a turn toward long-term stability. Washington's protectionist and trade war measures may push Asia's two largest economies closer together, but Japan still views China as a threat to its overall economic interests and has never reconciled itself to playing second fiddle in the region.

At the end of August, Japan deployed its largest warship, the helicopter carrier JS Kaga, for a two-month tour of the region, making stops in the Philippines, Singapore, Indonesia, India and Sri Lanka. Along with two destroyer escorts, the Kaga, designed to deploy marines with air backing, conducted naval drills in the South China Sea.

The overall intensification of US and Japanese militarism demonstrates that rather than bringing stability to the Asia-Pacific, Washington and Tokyo risk an armed clash with Beijing that could develop into a broader, catastrophic conflict.