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US, South Korea resume large-scale joint war games

The US and South Korea have restarted major joint military exercises for the first time in four years—a move certain to heighten tensions with North Korea and throughout the region.

The resumption of large-scale war games breaks a tacit agreement between US President Donald Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un in June 2018 to end such exercises in return for a moratorium on North Korean testing of nuclear weapons and long-range ballistic missiles.



Two Air Force A-10 Thunderbolt IIs fly alongside a Korean aircraft during Buddy Squadron over Wonju Air Base, South Korea, July 12, 2022 (Photo: US Department of Defense)

The military drills in South Korea, adjacent to northern China and Russia's Far East, take place as the Biden administration wages a proxy war against Russia in Ukraine and goads Beijing into conflict over Taiwan.

The Ulchi Freedom Shield (UFS) military exercises began on Monday, after preliminary exercises last week, and will continue to September 1. While details of their scope and size are limited, the war games involve thousands, potentially tens of thousands, of military personnel from the US and South Korea.

According to the Yonhap newsagency, the exercises are based on an "all-out war concept" and include computer simulation drills, 13 large-scale field training exercises and civilian defence.

The exercises involve a wide range of weaponry, including military aircraft, warships and tanks, and will rehearse joint aircraft carrier strike drills and amphibious landings.

The associated four-day civil defence exercise also began on Monday and involves 480,000 people from about 4,000 public institutions.

Nominally, the war games claim to be defensive—repelling a North Korean attack and defending the capital Seoul, then counter-attacking. However, joint planning under OPLAN 5015, agreed by the US and South Korea in 2015, involves pre-emptive strikes against North Korea and special forces "decapitation raids" to assassinate its top leaders.

Under the South Korean military alliance with the United States, the US has 28,500 troops stationed in bases in the country, along with warplanes and other military hardware, on permanent high alert. Moreover, in the event of war, the US military would have operational control (OPCON) over the huge, heavily-armed South Korean military and its 550,000 personnel. A transfer of command to South Korea has been under negotiation and foreshadowed for years but is yet to take place.

Both the US and South Korea claim the resumption of such military exercises is necessary because North Korea has conducted more than 30 missile tests this year and allegedly is preparing for a seventh nuclear test. In fact, South Korea's right-wing president, Yoon Suk-yeol, who took office in May, campaigned on a tougher military stance toward North

Korea, including a pre-emptive strike capability, and the restarting of huge annual joint war games with the US.

Last week, as the preliminary joint drills were about to begin, President Yoon announced an “audacious initiative” for peace on the Korean Peninsula—offering Pyongyang a large food program and economic assistance to upgrade infrastructure in return for the dismantling of North Korea’s nuclear program and arsenal. It was a sham offer that Yoon knew in advance would be rejected, as it included nothing about what is vital for North Korea—an end to the US-led economic and diplomatic sanctions that have crippled its economy.

Washington’s resumption of large-scale military exercises in South Korea is a calculated provocation. It is the US, not North Korea, that breached the understanding reached in 2018 between Trump and Kim Jong-un. Despite Trump effectively scuttling further talks by insisting that North Korea denuclearise before the lifting of any sanctions, Pyongyang has not conducted a nuclear test and has largely limited its missile testing to short- and medium-range rockets.

By restarting the Ulchi Freedom Shield exercises, the Biden administration has calculated that North Korea will have to respond—possibly by conducting a nuclear test—which would then provide the pretext for a further US military escalation.

The US announced last week that it would respond to a further North Korean nuclear test by deploying “strategic assets” in South Korea. The US warning followed a two-day meeting of the Korea-US Integrated Defense Dialogue (KIDD) and is part of a joint strategy agreed by Washington and Seoul.

While not specified, “strategic assets” could include strategic bombers, nuclear submarines or aircraft carriers capable of carrying nuclear missiles and bombs, as well as tactical nuclear weapons.

The announcement follows a similar declaration on August 11 by South Korean Defense Minister Lee Jong-sup, warning of a “high intensity” response to a North Korean nuclear test. “We plan to mobilise not only South Korean military capabilities but also US strategic assets,” he stated.

The stationing of US strategic weaponry in South Korea is not only, or even primarily, aimed against North Korea, but against China and Russia. Even as it escalates its proxy war against Russia, the Biden administration is engaged in one provocation after another against China, focussed on Taiwan, raising the danger of a global conflict involving nuclear-armed powers.

South Korea is already integrated into US nuclear war preparations. It hosts permanent US military bases and, along with Japan, is also part of the US anti-ballistic missile network in Northeast Asia. In 2017, the US deployed its Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system to South Korea, with the capacity to detect and shoot down long-range ballistic missiles.

While claiming such anti-missile systems are defensive, they are not designed to counter an all-out nuclear attack. Rather, the Pentagon is seeking the ability to launch a devastating nuclear attack on Russia and/or China that would eliminate their ability to retaliate. The THAAD systems are designed to counter any remaining enemy nuclear missiles. The US has never renounced a nuclear first strike.

Significantly, earlier this month, the US conducted so-called missile defence exercises jointly with South Korea and Japan in Hawaii for the first time since 2017. The US has exerted considerable pressure on both its military allies to work together, including through the signing of a high-level intelligence sharing agreement. Rapid intelligence sharing is viewed as essential by the Pentagon for the working of joint anti-ballistic missile systems.

The KIDD talks held last week not only warned of the deployment of US strategic assets to South Korea, but reaffirmed the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) between Tokyo and Seoul, as well as trilateral military cooperation. The meeting also reactivated a US-South Korea military coordination body, suspended in 2018, to plan “extended deterrence” measures against North Korea and discussed greater cooperation in the research and development of hi-tech weaponry, including in the domains of space, quantum computing, cyber defence, artificial intelligence and automation.

South Korea's Defense Acquisition Program administration announced in early August that it has been working on nearly 200 projects, including new surveillance satellites, tactical ground-to-ground guided weapons, ballistic missile early warning radar and long-range surface-to-air missile systems.

While North Korea provides a convenient pretext, the strengthening of the US military collaboration with, and military presence in, South Korea and Japan is the preparation for a wider war against both Russia and China.

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