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Huge US-South Korea air force exercises provoke North Korean missile launches

The US and South Korea are conducting large-scale air force exercises this week around the Korean Peninsula. Slated to run from Monday to Friday, these war games are the latest provocative actions conducted by Washington and its allies in the region. While portrayed as a defensive response to supposed North Korean threats, Washington is sending a signal that there will be no relaxation in its military build-up aimed above all against China.



B-52 bomber flies over Osan Air Base in Pyeongtaek, South Korea. The US is preparing to deploy up to six nuclear-capable B-52 bombers in northern Australia. [AP Photo/Ahn Young-joon, File]

Known as Vigilant Storm, the exercises are being held for the first time since 2017, and are some of the largest such joint drills conducted by the two militaries, this year involving some 240 aircraft. Pentagon press secretary Brigadier General Pat Ryder stated on

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November 1 that the exercise “is a long-planned exercise focused on enhancing interoperability of our forces to work together to defend the Republic of Korea and our allies in the region.”

The US has deployed more than 100 aircraft including F-35B stealth fighter jets stationed in Okinawa, Japan, EA-18 electronic warfare aircraft, KC-135 tankers, and U-2 reconnaissance planes. South Korea’s contingent includes 140 planes: F-35A stealth fighter jets, F-15K fighters, and KF-16 fighters. An Australian Air Force plane—a KC-30A multi-role tanker transport—is also taking part, a sign of the deepening integration of Canberra into US war plans with regional allies. They are expected to fly some 1,600 sorties throughout the week.

According to the US Air Force, the militaries “will work together with the joint services to perform major air missions such as close air support, defensive counter air, and emergency air operations 24 hours a day during the training period.” It added, “Support forces on the ground will also train their base defense procedures and survivability in case of attack.”

Previously known as Vigilant Ace, these joint air exercises began in 2015 and were held annually until 2017, when they involved some 230 total aircraft from the US and South Korea. Washington then halted the drills as part of the then-Trump administration’s attempts to coax Pyongyang out of China’s orbit with a combination of vague promises of economic support and threats to “totally destroy” the country.

Rather than trying to deescalate the situation, Washington is now deliberately inflaming tensions in the region with the resumption of large-scale war games with South Korea, including Ulchi Freedom Shield in August, goading North Korea, and placing Pyongyang in a situation it feels it must respond. Washington intends to seize on these responses to further justify the militarization of the region and the holding of military drills on China’s doorstep.

On November 1, North Korea’s Foreign Ministry denounced Washington as the “chief culprit in destroying peace and security.” The ministry added that “If the US continuously persists in the grave military provocations, the DPRK [North Korea] will take into account more powerful follow-up measures.”

On November 2, Pyongyang launched at least 23 short-range ballistic missiles (SRBM) and surface-to-air missiles, as well as 100 artillery shells into the Sea of Japan and Yellow Sea. One SRBM, the South Korean military claimed, crossed the Sea of Japan’s de facto maritime border separating the two Koreas before landing in international waters. It was reportedly the first time a North Korean missile has gone south of this border since the

1950–1953 Korean War. Seoul responded by launching three air-to-surface missiles from fighter jets into international waters north of the border.

Ultimately, the responsibility for these sharp tensions rests with Washington, which has junked the de facto agreement reached between Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un at the pair's 2018 summit under which North Korea halted its intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) and nuclear tests in exchange for the US stopping its joint war games with South Korea.

Pyongyang upheld its end of the bargain, and in return hoped to receive economic aid and the lifting of crippling, US-led sanctions. This did not happen. Washington allowed the North Korean situation to fester, so long as Pyongyang did not conduct new tests, allowing the US to focus its energies on stoking war with Russia in Ukraine and with China over Taiwan. This situation initially continued after Joe Biden took office in January 2021.

However, after receiving no relief from Washington in almost five years, Pyongyang in March conducted its first ICBM test since its moratorium on such launches. It followed this up with a second in May, after an inflammatory summit between Biden and then-newly inaugurated South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol in Seoul.

At their summit, Biden and Yoon agreed to deploy US strategic assets to the region while also agreeing to restart the Extended Deterrence Strategy and Consultation Group for the first time since January 2018. The group provides Washington and Seoul with the opportunity to discuss strategic and policy issues regarding so-called extended deterrence, including the use of nuclear weapons. Yoon is also pursuing closer relations with Japan, another key demand of Washington's war planning.

The Biden administration has deliberately precipitated Pyongyang's spate of missile launches since September, which includes a number of SRBMs, but no ICBM launches. Pyongyang has also refrained from conducting a seventh nuclear test, despite Washington claiming for months that the North is on the verge of doing so. This is part of the US war propaganda designed to obscure its own military escalation while provoking Pyongyang.

This is the same modus operandi that the US has used in its criminal wars in the Middle East and Central Asia over the past three decades: vilify the intended target, magnify the threat posed out of all proportion, mount pressure, economic blockades and threats against the victim, then seize on any response to further escalate the war drive. Significantly the Biden administration has dropped any pretense of taking steps to seek negotiations with North Korea.

The sheer scale of the current Vigilant Storm exercises in comparison to the size of Pyongyang's response gives the lie to US claims that these war games are defensive in character. North Korea is an impoverished country of 26 million people, largely isolated from the global economy. On the other hand, the United States alone fields a massive military, and is ultimately using the situation on the Korean Peninsula to stoke a war with Beijing, which Washington views as the biggest potential challenge to its global hegemony.

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