

US and South Korea begin joint military exercises

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Tensions on the Korean Peninsula are likely to rise as annual war games between the United States and South Korea take place over the next two months. Washington and Seoul are using the large mobilization of troops and weaponry involved in these military exercises to threaten and intimidate North Korea as well as China.

The South Korean navy announced Friday that the Foal Eagle exercises had begun early. “The naval maneuver drill started ahead of the official Foal Eagle schedule inevitably to fit the schedule of the US ships so they could come here,” a naval officer told the Yonhap News Agency.

The two exercises known as Foal Eagle and Key Resolve are held each spring. Foal Eagle officially starts today and involves 3,700 US and 200,000 Korean troops. It will be followed by Key Resolve in which 8,600 American and 10,000 South Korean soldiers will take part.

The Foal Eagle naval drill will take place in the Yellow Sea, the Sea of Japan, and the East China Sea just south of the Korean Peninsula and is slated to run through to mid-March. The South Korean Navy released a statement saying, “We expect to boost joint operational capabilities between Seoul and Washington and solidify a strong joint defense posture.”

Foal Eagle comprises a series of land, sea, and air drills. Friday’s exercise began in the waters south of Korea and involves live-fire drills. Ten South Korean vessels are taking part, including the Gangnamcho, a destroyer. The USS Michael Murphy, a destroyer, is participating along with attack helicopters and patrol planes.

The US navy announced last month that one of its new littoral combat vessels, USS Fort Worth, would participate in Foal Eagle for the first time. The ship,

which is designed to operate in shallow waters, carries a helicopter and a drone and is armed with missiles and a 57-millimeter gun.

Key Resolve is a computerized command post exercise focusing on crisis management and combat readiness between the two allies. Both exercises are aimed, in the first instance, against North Korea, but also underscore the US military presence close to the Chinese mainland.

Pyongyang denounced the US-South Korean exercises. An editorial in the official *Rodong Sinmun* last Tuesday declared, “The whole course of Key Resolve and Foal Eagle is aimed to invade North Korea through preemptive strikes.” Another editorial on Thursday warned that North Korea would “wage a merciless sacred war against the US now that the latter has chosen confrontation.” As it has in the past, the North Korean military test fired two short-range missiles off its coast today.

These bellicose but largely empty threats, like its nuclear program, are part of Pyongyang’s attempts to gain some leverage with Washington in exchange for easing crippling US-led economic sanctions and international isolation. However, this rhetoric plays directly into the hands of the US and its allies.

In the past few years, the US used the joint exercises and supposed North Korean threat to escalate tensions on the Korean Peninsula. In 2013, as the threat of conflict loomed, the US flew nuclear capable bombers to the Korean Peninsula. Last year a tense artillery exchange erupted between the North and South along the Northern Limit Line in the Yellow Sea, the disputed sea border between the two countries.

North Korea has been calling for dialogue with the South. In October, Pyongyang sent top-ranking officials to South Korea to observe the closing

ceremonies of the 2014 Asian Games and hold talks with their counterparts. Then in his New Year's address, North Korean leader Kim Jong-un offered to hold a summit with President Park Geun-hye.

In January, Pyongyang also offered direct talks with the US and to suspend a fourth nuclear test if the US would call off its annual war games with South Korea. North Korea's last test was conducted in February 2013. Washington rejected the North's overtures outright, indicating it currently has no interest in reaching an accord with North Korea.

The current war games also provide the US with an opportunity to highlight its commitment to the "pivot to Asia," which has been questioned by Washington's Asian allies as the US focuses on its confrontation with Russia in Ukraine and its new war in the Middle East. The "pivot" is aimed at diplomatically isolating and militarily encircling China in order to force Beijing to accept US hegemony in Asia.

US Republican congressman Randy Forbes, chairman of the Seapower and Projection Forces subcommittee, stated last month, "Devoting credible resources to the capabilities required to ensure US presence in Asia is the only way to ensure that the 'rebalance' is more than just a slogan." He continued, "Both our allies and our competitors judge our commitment to the Asia-Pacific region by the capabilities we maintain."

The current war games take place a few days after Joel Wit, an analyst at the US-Korea Institute at John Hopkins University, predicted North Korea could have as few as 10 or as many as 100 nuclear bombs by 2020 as well as the ability to mount them on missiles. Speaking at a press conference last week David Albright from the Institute for Science and International Security, Wit declared that North Korea possessing 100 bombs and intercontinental ballistic missiles was a "pretty scary scenario."

Such statements coming on the eve of the US-South Korean exercise only further fuel tensions on the Korean Peninsula, which the US uses to put pressure on China. Albright once again blamed China for allowing North Korea to import equipment used in its nuclear program to cross their shared border: "Just cracking down on the border could do a lot, and they (China) do very little now," he said.

With the war games scheduled to late April, the Obama administration could well exploit the tense

situation to ratchet up a dangerous confrontation with North Korea.



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