

US military boosts anti-missile systems in South Korea

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The US is boosting its anti-missile capacity in South Korea by adding an extra Patriot missile battery ahead of talks this week with Seoul over the basing of a Terminal High-Altitude Area Defence (THAAD) system in the country. While North Korea's recent nuclear test and satellite launch provided the pretext, the measures are part of Washington's far broader military build-up throughout the region, aimed against China.

The Pentagon announced yesterday that a Patriot Advance Capability-3 (Pac-3) missile system was moved last week from Fort Bliss in Texas to the Osan Air Base near Seoul, alongside two existing batteries. The Pac-3 system, with an altitude of up to 40 kilometres and a maximum speed of Mach 5, can intercept short- and medium-range missiles, such as the North Korean Scud and Rodong missiles.

Washington has long pressed for a THAAD system to be based in South Korea to supplement two emplacements in Japan. Up until last week, Seoul resisted the US demands out of concern that it would trigger a reaction from China, South Korea's largest trading partner. Both Beijing and Moscow oppose the US expansion of long-range anti-ballistic missile systems in East Asia, which are not just aimed at North Korea, but are part of the Pentagon's planning for nuclear war with Russia and China.

The increase in US anti-missile systems is part of a broader shift in military strategy by the Pentagon in South Korea. As part of the "pivot" or "rebalance" to Asia, the US is moving its military forces on the Korean Peninsula, currently based in Seoul or north of the capital, to two "enduring hubs" to the south. This includes upgrading the Osan Air Base. As a result, most of the 27,000 American troops will no longer be on the immediate frontline with North Korea.

Far from being a defensive move, the restructuring of American forces in South Korea is bound up with a more aggressive plan, agreed last year between Washington and Seoul, known as OPLAN 5015. The details have been closely guarded even from the South Korean national assembly, provoking protests from lawmakers on the parliamentary defence committee.

A Brookings Institution report published on January 25, however, made clear that the new strategy marked a sharp shift from the previous defensive stance. OPLAN 5015, it explained, "envision[s] limited warfare with an emphasis on pre-emptive strikes on strategic targets in North Korea and 'decapitation raids' to exterminate North Korean leaders. It is considered to be a more offensive-oriented plan, making escalation more readily possible than its predecessor, OPLAN 5027, which emphasises forward-defensive postures."

OPLAN 5015 goes hand-in-hand with Concept Plan (CONPLAN) 5029, "which focuses on 'sudden change' crisis scenarios" involving North Korea, ranging from an internal revolt, and mass movements of people internally and out of the country, to various forms of environmental and social chaos. The US and South Korea have already established a joint division to intervene in North Korea during such a crisis to destroy its so-called weapons of mass destruction.

The South Korean government has not so far agreed to translate CONPLAN 5029 into detailed operational planning, fearing that it would be marginalised by Washington in the event of a crisis on the Korean Peninsula. Since the end of the Korean War in 1953, the US military has maintained full operational control of the South Korean military in the event of a conflict with North Korea. South Korea's forces include 495,000 army troops, backed by thousands of tanks, armoured vehicles and artillery pieces, as well as a

substantial and well-armed navy and airforce.

The new “offensive-oriented plan” is already evident in joint US-South Korean military exercises in the lead-up to next month’s major annual war games—Key Resolve and Foal Eagle.

* Last Saturday, the South Korean and US navies began a three-day “submarine-chasing drill” to boost their ability to “detect, distinguish, trace and attack enemy submarines.” The exercise featured the USS North Carolina—a Virginia-class nuclear attack submarine capable of launching Tomahawk cruise missiles as well as torpedoes. A second joint submarine-hunting exercise involving sea-based patrol aircraft begins tomorrow.

* US Special Forces units completed a 10-day joint exercise with their South Korean counterparts last Friday to ensure “a high level of ready, flexible and agile combined special operation forces.” According to the Yonhap news agency, the main goal was “to train special forces for enemy penetration missions”—that is, for direct intervention into North Korea.

* The same Yonhap report noted that the South Korean military last Thursday carried out “massive artillery drills in the maritime border areas” with North Korea, with tanks, self-propelled howitzers and other shore-based artillery in live-fire exercises on frontline islands in the Yellow Sea. The navy simultaneously conducted exercises featuring some 20 warships, as well as combat aircraft.

* In late January, the US and South Korean air forces conducted a four-day exercise known as “Buddy Wing 16-1” to ensure “interoperability” and “better counter North Korea’s provocations.”

South Korea is also participating in the current American joint air drills, known as Cope North, on Guam with Australia, Japan, New Zealand and the Philippines. Billed as the largest such exercise, it includes training in air combat tactics and air-to-ground strikes.

The annual Key Resolve and Foal Eagle joint exercises, in effect dress rehearsals for war with North Korea, have always provoked tensions with Pyongyang. Due to begin on March 7, these drills will be the biggest-ever. They will reportedly include the aircraft carrier USS John C. Stennis and its strike group, and nuclear capable B-52 and B-2 bombers. These war games, mobilising advanced hardware and

hundreds of thousands of military personnel, will be based this year on the “offensive-oriented” OPLAN 5015 and are thus highly provocative.

While nominally aimed at North Korea, the real target of the US military build-up is China, not this isolated, crisis-ridden state.

The Brookings Institution report referred to above is entitled, “The role of the US-ROK [South Korea] alliance in the process of unification.” It is primarily preoccupied with the military invasion and take-over of North Korea in the event of a major internal crisis. It notes that 690,000 military personnel would participate, along with about 160 naval vessels and 2,000 military aircraft.

The report warns, however, that past strategies based on a war confined to the Korean Peninsula might be “inadequate or obsolete.” It cites the comments last December of US Joint Chiefs of Staff chairman General Joseph Dunford, who declared that any conflict with North Korea would inevitably be “transregional, multi-domain and multifunctional.” In other words, it would involve other powers, particularly China, and every arena, including space and cyberspace.

Dunford warned that currently the US military is “not optimised for that fight” and insisted that the “trans” and “multi” aspects of such a conflict must be addressed as a pressing priority. Translated from this obscure military language, what one of the top US generals is referring to is the necessity to plan for a devastating all-out “transregional” war—that is, World War III.



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