

US pushes ahead with provocative war games in South Korea

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21 August 2017

In the midst of high tensions on the Korean Peninsula, the US is provocatively proceeding with joint military exercises with South Korea, involving tens of thousands of troops and aimed at training and preparing for war with North Korea.

Last year's annual Ulchi-Freedom Guardian drills involved 25,000 American military personnel and 50,000 South Korean troops backed by warships and warplanes. The number of US personnel involved this year is 17,500, but US Defence Secretary James Mattis declared yesterday that the reduction had nothing to do with the tense situation the Korean Peninsula.

The exercises are reportedly based on the joint US-South Korean Operations Plan (OPLAN) 5015, adopted in 2015, that involved pre-emptive strikes against North Korea and so-called "decapitation" raids aimed at eliminating the top leadership in Pyongyang. General Joe Dunford, chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, last week declined to say whether more "strategic assets" such as long-range B-1 bombers would be involved. The exercises will run until August 31.

The US is proceeding with the war games despite repeated calls by China for them to be called off, in return for North Korea putting its missile testing on hold and both sides agreeing to talks to end the dangerous confrontation. The Trump administration has flatly refused to cancel joint military exercises with South Korea, claiming they are purely defensive in character.

The Pyongyang regime warned yesterday in the official *Rodong Sinmun* that the joint exercises were "like pouring gasoline on a fire" and would worsen tensions on the Korean Peninsula. Such "reckless behavior [was] driving the situation into the uncontrollable phase of a nuclear war," it stated.

The comments follow a series of highly inflammatory

remarks by US President Trump in response to two tests of long-range missiles by North Korea in July. Trump warned that further threats by Pyongyang against the United States would be met by "fire and fury like the world had never seen." He then warned North Korea that military options were "locked and loaded."

Pyongyang responded by threatening to test fire four intermediate range missiles into waters just short of the American territory of Guam, home to major US air and naval bases in the Western Pacific. Last week North Korean leader Kim Jong-un declared that he had put that plan on hold and would wait and see what Washington did.

By proceeding with the major Ulchi-Freedom Guardian exercises, the US is once again deliberately inflaming the situation. Last year North Korea reacted to the US-South Korean war games by conducting a fifth nuclear test within days. The Trump administration would exploit a similar response this year to dramatically raise the stakes, including, potentially, US military strikes against North Korea.

Washington has boxed Pyongyang into a corner with the imposition of crippling economic sanctions that ban the import of its most important exports including coal, iron ore, other minerals and seafood. The small economically backward country is already the most isolated diplomatically and economically in the world.

At the same time, the Trump administration is pressing China, North Korea's largest trading partner, to impose further punitive measures to force Pyongyang to bow to US demands to abandon its nuclear and ballistic missile programs. North Korea is well aware of the fate of the Iraqi and Libyan regimes which agreed to give up their weapons of mass destruction only to be overthrown by the US and its

allies.

At the same time, the US is exploiting the so-called threat posed by North Korea to justify its military build-up throughout the Asia-Pacific in preparation for war with China, which Washington regards as its chief obstacle to regional and world dominance.

Even as it is demanding Beijing take tougher action against Pyongyang, the Trump administration has instigated an investigation by the US trade representative into China's alleged threat to intellectual property that could result in US retaliation.

The worsening confrontation on the Korean Peninsula is also feeding into the political crisis of the Trump administration and intense infighting in Washington. The removal of Trump's chief political strategist Steve Bannon last week came just days after he had declared that there was no military solution to the North Korean threat.

In what amounted to a public rebuke to Bannon, Defence Secretary Mattis and Secretary of State Rex Tillerson both stressed that military options remained on the table in dealing with North Korea. Mattis warned that if North Korea launched a missile towards Guam, the US or US allies Japan and South Korea, "we would take immediate, specific actions to take it down."

Tillerson declared that the US was still seeking a negotiated solution but was "prepared militarily" to respond, if necessary. He said that any diplomatic effort "has to be backed by a strong military consequence if North Korea chooses wrongly."

Tillerson and Mattis were speaking at a joint press conference in Tokyo after meeting for annual security talks with their Japanese counterparts. As well as the Ulchi-Freedom Guardian exercises in South Korea, the US military is also carrying out live-fire war games with the Japanese military on the northern Japanese island of Hokkaido.

Underscoring the extreme tensions on the Korean Peninsula, South Korean President Moon Jae-in warned last week that North Korea would cross "a red line" if it "launches an intercontinental ballistic missile again and weaponises it by putting a nuclear warhead on top."

The entire region remains on a knife edge. With the US and its allies primed militarily, a small incident, whether deliberate or accidental, has the potential to

plunge the Korean Peninsula into a devastating war that draws in other nuclear powers such as China and Russia.



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