

South Korea deploys naval unit to Strait of Hormuz

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South Korea's defense ministry announced January 21 that it will send naval troops to patrol the Strait of Hormuz off the coast of Iran. While Seoul claims that this dispatch will be independent of United States' maneuvers in the region, the Moon Jae-in administration is in fact lining up with Washington's war drive against Tehran.

Seoul stated that it will expand the role of its Cheonghae Unit, which has been deployed off the coast of Somalia since 2009 and is comprised of 300 troops, including special forces and a military helicopter. "In consideration of the current situation in the Middle East, the government has decided to temporarily expand the Cheonghae Unit's sphere of activity in order to guarantee safety of our people and the freedom of navigation of our vessels," the defense ministry said.

A South Korean naval destroyer, the Wang Geon, will now operate in the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman, separated by the Strait of Hormuz. However, cutting across Seoul's claims of "independent" patrols, two liaison officers from the Cheonghae Unit will be dispatched to the US's International Maritime Security Construct (IMSC) to facilitate cooperation between US and South Korea forces.

Washington welcomed the decision as it builds a coalition for war with Iran. "As we have stated in the past, this is an international problem that requires an international solution," Pentagon spokesperson David Eastburn stated. "We welcome our South Korean allies helping to ensure freedom of navigation in the Middle East by supporting the IMSC."

Less than two weeks prior to the announcement, Seoul had cast doubt on joining the coalition. "I think the stance of the United States and ours cannot always be the same in political analysis and when considering bilateral ties with countries in the Middle East,"

Foreign Minister Kang Kyung-wha (Gang Gyeong-hwa) said January 9. "We have had sustained economic ties with Iran for a long time and at the moment are continuously trying to carry out exchanges in humanitarian assistance and education."

South Korea had relied heavily on oil imports from Iran, but halted them last May. South Korea is the world's fifth largest crude oil importer and is dependent on the Middle East for more than 70 percent of its supply.

A meeting with US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo a few days after Kang's statements in San Francisco, coupled with increased demands that Seoul shoulder more of the financial burden for hosting US troops, led to an about-face.

The deployment is open-ended, with a foreign ministry official telling Yonhap news agency that the "temporary" dispatch meant that it would be ongoing "until situations in the Middle East improve." The foreign ministry official also stated: "*We've made preparations for possible missions in the Hormuz Strait* (emphasis added), but Cheonghae's basic missions—anti-piracy activities and escorting ships—remain unchanged."

In other words, Seoul had been planning for such a deployment. The Wang Geon destroyer had already been outfitted with anti-submarine weaponry, anti-aircraft guns, and other equipment that makes it prepared to deal with military situations far beyond piracy.

In addition, no new law has been passed to confirm the deployment, with the government saying the existing law on the anti-piracy mission allows for operations in surrounding waters. Seoul, therefore, is sending South Korean troops into a potential war zone without even the pretense of public debate on the

matter and behind the backs of the South Korean people. This is due to broad anti-war sentiment in the country, in the face of which Seoul sent troops to both Iraq and Afghanistan, under the previous administrations of the liberal Noh Moo-hyun and then the conservative Lee Myung-bak, to aid Washington in those criminal wars.

The troop dispatch is only further proof that Moon and his ruling Democratic Party of Korea, no less than the conservatives, back US imperialist interests around the globe.

Moon came to office in 2017 in part by exploiting anti-war sentiment among workers and youth. Moon claimed that he would distance Seoul from the pro-war positions of the previous Park Geun-hye administration that had lined up behind Washington's war drive in Northeast Asia.

Under Park, North and South Korea were brought to the brink of war in August 2015 as Seoul sharply escalated tensions following unproven claims that Pyongyang had ordered landmines placed along Southern troops' patrol routes along the border. Park also worked to further align Seoul with the US ballistic missile system aimed at China, that included joining a US-Japanese intelligence link and agreeing to deploy a Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) ballistic missile battery and its corresponding radar system in South Korea.

While running for office, Moon claimed his administration could serve as a break on the US war drive and led people to believe that he would halt the THAAD deployment. Moon instead has maintained South Korea's position within the US ballistic missile system and praised Trump for the latter's threats and ultimatums to Pyongyang. Moon's own agenda is aimed at dampening tensions in order to increase the economic exploitation of North Korean workers and resources for the benefit of the South Korean bourgeoisie.

In this vein, the deployment to the Persian Gulf is entirely in line with the Moon administration's pro-war agenda. The South Korean ruling class, whether under the conservatives or the Democrats, believes it can enrich itself by lining up with US imperialism. A war in the Middle East, in particular, could lead to lucrative construction contracts for South Korean companies that have operated in the region for decades as well as

access to oil.

A conflict with Iran, however, would not be limited to the region in the same manner as the Iraq War. It would draw in nuclear-armed powers China and Russia, meaning South Korea could easily find itself in a major war with two neighboring countries. These issues are being consciously kept from the South Korean working class and youth.



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