Top US officials in South Korea again denounce China

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US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin, currently in South Korea after visiting Japan, continued to push their anti-China agenda in talks with their South Korean counterparts. The fact that two of President Biden's top officials are making their first overseas trip to US imperialism's two military allies in North East Asia underscores the determination of the new administration to ratchet up the confrontation with China begun under Obama and escalated under Trump.

Blinken and Austin outlined the purpose of their trip in an op-ed entitled "America's partnerships are 'force multipliers' in the world" published in the *Washington Post* on Monday. After reiterating Biden's declarations that his administration would reengage with the world and "revitalize" alliances, their deliberate use of military language makes clear that partnerships are being strengthened in preparation for war.

"Our alliances are what our military calls 'force multipliers," the comment stated. "We're able to achieve far more with them than we could without them. No country on Earth has a network of alliances and partnerships like ours. It would be a huge strategic error to neglect these relationships."

After once more accusing China of challenging the international rules-based order—that is, where the US sets the rules—the two officials declared: "Here again, we see how working with our allies is critical. Our combined power makes us stronger when we must push back against China's aggression and threats."

Yesterday in a meeting with South Korean Foreign Minister Chung Eui-yong, Blinken again lashed out at Beijing for "using coercion and aggression to systematically erode the economy in Hong Kong, undercut democracy in Taiwan, abuse human rights in Tibet and assert claims in the South China Sea." Washington has hypocritically used denunciations of "human rights" for decades to vilify its opponents and justify coups and criminal wars of aggression, while turning a blind eye to the abuses and atrocities of its allies and partners.

Also under discussion was the highly unstable situation on the Korean Peninsula. President Trump touted his diplomacy with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un as a success, but talks broke down in 2019, resulting in a tense stand-off that resolved none of the underlying issues. North Korea stopped its nuclear and long-range ballistic missile tests but gained little in return—a halt to major US-South Korean war games—and is still subject to crippling UN and unilateral US economic sanctions.

Blinken also chose to play the human rights card in relation to North Korea—a step that can only heighten regional tensions. He denounced the North Korean regime for its "systematic and widespread abuses against its own people" and declared that its nuclear and missile programs posed "a threat to the region and to the world." His comments, which followed a warning by Kim Jong-un's sister, Kim Yo-jong, to the US on Tuesday to "refrain from causing a stink at its first step," were a calculated slap in the face to Pyongyang.

Blinken affirmed that the US alliance with South Korea was "unwavering" and "iron clad." While in Tokyo, he said Washington had reached out to North Korea through various diplomatic channels since mid-February, but had received no response. He said the Biden administration was engaged in a review of policy toward North Korea that would be finalised in coming weeks, adding that the US was examining both "additional pressure measures" and "diplomatic paths."

Like Blinken, Austin restated the US commitment to

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the defence of South Korea. Prior to talks with South Korean Defence Secretary Suh Wook, Austin said: "You and I can both agree that military readiness is a top priority, and that our combined readiness must ensure that we are ready to fight tonight, if needed."

Austin touted a recent agreement under which Seoul will pay an extra 13.9 percent toward the upkeep of 28,500 US military personnel and bases in South Korea. The deal was aimed at mending relations strained by Trump's demands that South Korea pay as much as 400 percent more.

No deal, however, has been reached to finalise arrangements for the handover of wartime operational control (OPCON) to South Korea. If a war broke out today, South Korea's large military forces would be under the overall command of the Pentagon, not the country's government and generals. In comments on the OPCON handover cited in the *South China Morning Post*, Professor Yang Moo-Jin at the University of North Korean Studies in Seoul said: "The US now appears to be hesitating to do so as it apparently wants to use the US troops in the South as part of its deterrence against China."

The trip by Blinken and Austin takes place against the background of the first ever leaders' meeting last Friday of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, or Quad—a grouping of the US, Australia, India and Japan directed against China. While the US has not formally asked its military ally, South Korea, to join the grouping, Seoul has been reluctant to do so out of concern over relations with China, its largest trading partner, and the potential for further heightening tensions with North Korea—China's only formal military ally.

South Korea's hesitation underscores the fact that the Quad is a quasi-military alliance that is part of the US war preparations against China. Last week's summit was a significant step in further consolidating this bloc, which already includes two formal US allies—Japan and Australia—as well as India, which has a strong strategic partnership with the US, including basing arrangements, technological collaboration and arms sales.

In their comment in the *Washington Post*, Blinken and Austin referred to the central point of Biden's foreign policy speech last month, writing: "As the president has said the world is at an inflection point. A fundamental debate is underway about the future—and whether democracy or autocracy offers the best path forward."

Washington's war drive against Beijing has nothing to do with democracy in China or anywhere else in the world, including in the US where a fascist coup attempt was made on January 6. Rather, the decade-long US build-up to war against China is aimed at subordinating what Washington regards as the chief threat to its continued global domination.

Austin and Blinken are engaged in consolidating Washington's "force multipliers" in the region—in the first place Japan and South Korea. The two top officials are due to sit down today with their South Korean counterparts in their first formal 2+2 talks for five years. Blinken will then fly to Alaska where, having set the stage for a fiery confrontation, he and US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan will hold their first talks with their Chinese counterparts.

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