

US-instigated tensions around Korean Peninsula intensify

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The United States is continuing to ramp up tensions with North Korea following a series of North Korean missile tests even as Washington intensifies its confrontation with China. The US is exploiting these missile launches as the pretext for its military build-up against China, particularly in North East Asia alongside its military allies—Japan and South Korea.

North Korea has conducted a number of missile tests between September 25 and October 9. The latest launch took place shortly before 2 a.m. Sunday morning when Pyongyang fired two, short-range ballistic missiles (SRMB) into the Sea of Japan. In total, the North has launched 12 projectiles, including sending an intermediate-range ballistic missile (IRMB) over Japan on October 4. It was the first missile North Korea has launched over Japan since 2017.

On Monday, which was also the 77th Party Foundation Day, the state-run Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) reported that the missile drills took place “under the simulation of loading tactical nuclear warheads.” The exercises confirmed “the order of taking tactical nuclear warheads out and transporting them and of managing them in a rapid and safe way at the time of operation.”

North Korean leader Kim Jong-un was quoted as saying, “This is the verification of the operation posture of our war deterrent and, at the same time, an occasion that proved the reliability of the thorough preparedness of the state nuclear defense posture.”

North Korea is responding to the US war planning in the region, which is primarily aimed at China as Washington and Tokyo, backed by South Korea, attempt to provoke a war over Taiwan. The US plans include a return to large-scale military exercises with South Korea and Japan on China’s doorstep.

At the same time, Washington is creating a situation

to which Pyongyang feels it must respond. The US had halted large-scale joint military exercises with South Korea under the previous Donald Trump administration in a tacit agreement with Pyongyang to place a moratorium on nuclear and intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) tests.

The US and South Korea have now resumed major war games for the first time in five years. The Pentagon deployed the USS Ronald Reagan nuclear-powered aircraft carrier and its strike group to the Sea of Japan for joint drills beginning September 26. Following the launch of the IRBM on October 4, the US redeployed the USS Reagan, which had left the previous week, to the Sea of Japan for additional drills in a move the South Korean Joint Chiefs of Staff called “very unusual.”

The US State Department on Monday also denounced North Korea’s missile tests as “unlawful and destabilizing the region” while “reject[ing] the notion that our defensive actions to respond to the DPRK [North Korea] threats justifies their escalatory and unlawful behavior.” The State Department claimed, “We remain committed to a diplomatic approach to the DPRK and call on the DPRK to engage in dialogue.”

In reality, Washington has refused to address Pyongyang’s well-founded security concerns. North Korea, an impoverished, former colonial country of 26 million people, has long been the target of US imperialism, from the division of the Korean Peninsula and the 1950-1953 Korean war to the Trump administration’s threats in 2017 to “totally destroy” the country. Furthermore, the US has a long track record of illegal invasions and regime-change operations in countries around the world that do not line up behind US interests.

Washington’s claims that it is committed to a

diplomatic solution to the dangerous standoff with North Korea ring hollow—particularly as the US wages war against Russia in Ukraine at the risk of nuclear Armageddon.

US imperialism, backed by Japanese imperialism and South Korea, has systematically isolated Pyongyang through crippling economic sanctions, which have created an economic crisis alongside the COVID-19 pandemic. As it targets China over Taiwan, the Biden administration has allowed North Korea to languish under these conditions, including new sanctions on October 7 targeting two individuals and three entities. Pyongyang's missile tests represent an attempt to bring Washington to the bargaining table to negotiate an end to these sanctions.

South Korea's right-wing administration of President Yoon Suk-yeol, which came to office in May, has also contributed to this instability on the Korean Peninsula. Yoon's presidential office stated on Monday, "It is important to accurately recognize the grave security reality on the Korean Peninsula and in Northeast Asia and prepare appropriately for it." Seoul has followed Washington's lead, not only in restarting joint military exercises but on a key US demand: the improvement of bilateral relations with Japan.

Driven by trade and other disputes, Seoul and Tokyo's relations have been strained in recent years. However, last Thursday, Yoon and Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida spoke by phone to discuss their response to North Korea, and denounced Pyongyang's weapon tests. Yoon stated the following day, "We shared the understanding that if relations between South Korea and Japan return to the good times of the past at an early date and exchanges between businesses and between our people become smooth, it will be of great help to the two countries' economies."

What goes unstated is the fact that improved relations between the two is a necessity from Washington's standpoint for its anti-ballistic missile system being installed throughout the region. This system above all targets China and includes the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) battery installed in Seongju, South Korea and its corresponding radar, two of which are deployed in Japan. In order to effectively operate this system, the US requires high-level, bilateral intelligence sharing and cooperation between Tokyo and Seoul.

In addition, on October 6, the US military delivered equipment to Seongju to complete an upgrade of its THAAD battery. The presence of the battery and its radar system capable of spying on Chinese territory has falsely been presented as a necessary defensive measure to protect the South Korea population from a North Korean attack. From its current location, however, the battery's 200-kilometer range does not even cover Seoul, South Korea's capital of ten million people.

Amid a rapidly intensifying US confrontation with China, US pressure on North Korea is creating another dangerous situation in the Asia-Pacific that could spiral into a larger conflict.



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