US flies nuclear-capable B-1B strategic bombers over South Korea

Ben McGrath
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US imperialism is sharply escalating tensions on the Korean Peninsula as part of its military build-up throughout the Indo-Pacific in preparation for war against China.

Last week, the US and South Korea conducted large-scale joint air force drills, ?code-named ?Vigilant Storm, involving more than 240 military aircraft. This was the latest large-scale joint war games between Washington and Seoul this year, ending the previous de facto agreement between North Korea and the Trump administration to scale down such exercises in exchange for a moratorium on Pyongyang's nuclear and long-range ballistic missile tests.

Pyongyang responded to the war games with a spate of missile tests, included a suspected intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) launch last Thursday.

US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin and South Korean Defense Minister Lee Jong-seop responded and announced plans at a joint press conference in Washington, also on Thursday, for the de facto permanent stationing of US nuclear-capable assets in South Korea for the first time since 1991.

While Austin described those deployments as rotations, Lee stated the US would send "strategic assets *to the level equivalent to constant deployment* through increasing the frequency and intensity of strategic asset deployment in and around the Korean peninsula [emphasis added]."

Washington and Seoul also extended last week's exercises for an extra day to Saturday and underscored their decision by flying two B-1B strategic bombers, accompanied by South Korean and US fighters, over the Korean peninsula for the first time since 2017.

While the US Air Force claims these bombers are no longer capable of carrying nuclear armaments, there is no reason to take the Pentagon at its word. The US previously flew a nuclear-capable B-52 bomber over the Osan Air Base, 50 km south of Seoul, in January 2016 following North Korea's fourth nuclear test.

Washington bears primary responsibility for these tensions in the region. North Korea has been a target of US imperialism since before the 1950-1953 Korean War. Years of brutal US-led sanctions have strangled the North Korean economy and left it isolated internationally, turning the Korean peninsula into a powder keg.

Far from seeking to ease tensions, Washington is intent on escalating them. The Biden administration stated in April 2021 that its policy on North Korea would "not focus on achieving a grand bargain, nor will it rely on strategic patience." In other words, talks would only be held if Pyongyang effectively capitulates.

Last Thursday, Secretary Austin pointed to the US deployment of nuclear-capable F-35A fighter jets to South Korea in July for 10 days, the first such visit since December 2017. He also highlighted the visit of the nuclear-powered USS Ronald Reagan aircraft carrier to South Korea at the end of September, also for the first time in five years. The vessel and its strike group took part in joint exercises with South Korea and Japan.

At their summit in May, Biden and newly elected South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol agreed to deploy US strategic assets to the region. They also agreed to restart the Extended Deterrence Strategy and Consultation Group for the first time since January 2018. The group provides Washington and Seoul with the opportunity to discuss strategic and policy issues regarding so-called extended deterrence, including the use of nuclear weapons.

Whether nuclear-capable US military assets deployed to South Korea will be armed with nuclear weapons or not is deliberately shrouded in secrecy. Under Washington's "Neither Confirm nor Deny" policy drawn up in 1958, the US does not comment on the locations of its nuclear weapons at any given time, which will only add to uncertainty and instability in the region.

The US permanently based nuclear weapons on the

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Korean Peninsula from 1958 to 1991, targeting the Soviet Union and China. In 1967, there were some 950 warheads in South Korea and both South Korea and Japan are still covered under the so-called US "nuclear umbrella," which includes strategic bombers, intercontinental ballistic missiles and submarines.

South Korea also had nuclear ambitions. In late 1971, South Korean military dictator Park Chung-hee first instructed his staff to draw up plans to develop nuclear weapons. Despite treaties with the US to the contrary, the Park government worked in secret to develop a nuclear bomb and a ballistic missile delivery system. Only in 1976 did Park bow to US pressure to give up the program, though Seoul's research into nuclear power continued.

The sheer scale of the US planned nuclear-capable deployments demonstrates that the target is not tiny, impoverished North Korea, but China. Each step Pyongyang takes provides the US with the pretext to flex its muscles while deepening trilateral cooperation with South Korea and Japan.

As a result, the US bases in South Korea and the country itself are the frontline of any conflict with China. The US Kunsan Air Base is just 198 kilometres from the North Korean border and 950 kilometres from Beijing. Osan Air Base is just 80 kilometres from the border and 976 kilometres to Beijing. Moreover, the headquarters of Russia's Pacific Fleet near Vladivostok and nuclear facilities of both Russia and China are in easy range.

Significantly in time of war, Washington would take operational control (OPCON) of South Korea's huge military, despite drawn-out negotiations to end the policy. By 2020 figures, the South Korean military has 550,000 active-duty personnel, the seventh largest in the world, 2,750,000 reservists, and is heavily armed with the latest armour, military aircraft and naval vessels.

Washington is also expanding its anti-ballistic missile system throughout the region including in South Korea. Far from being defensive, it is designed to protect US bases from counterattack in any war the US instigates. This includes a recently upgraded Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) battery in South Korea, which covers US military bases, but not densely populated cities like Seoul. A second THAAD battery is stationed in Guam. THAAD operates with the AN/TPY2 X-Band radar, with two additional X-band radars stationed in northern and southern Japan.

The re-stationing of nuclear-capable assets in South Korea makes clear that the US is rapidly preparing for nuclear war in conjunction with its military allies in the region. Even as it prepares to send such assets to South Korea, the US recently announced that it will station nuclear-capable B-52 bombers at Tindal air force base in northern Australia. It is also carrying out upgrades to airfields in northern Australia and on Guam, which is already home to nuclear-capable bombers.

Washington clearly wants to put US nuclear-capable assets in Japan as well but the government confronts broad public opposition, stemming from the criminal US dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945. Nevertheless, in February, former prime minister Shinzo Abe initiated a debate in Tokyo over Japan openly hosting US nuclear weapons.

Even as the US and its NATO allies wage war against Russia in Ukraine, the Biden administration is in the advanced stages of preparing for, and provoking, conflict with China. Under the fraudulent banner of defending democracy, US imperialism is seeking to subordinate the Eurasian landmass and its huge human and natural resources, halt its historic decline and consolidate its global hegemony.

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) has launched an international campaign calling on young people to build a unified anti-war movement of the international working class to halt the war in Ukraine and prevent a nuclear holocaust by fighting for a socialist future for humanity. The IYSSE will be holding an international online meeting on December 10 to launch this campaign.

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