US defense secretary in South Korea to further war preparations against China

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Earlier this week, US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin visited South Korea for talks with President Yoon Suk-yeol and Defense Minister Lee Jong-seop. The trip is part of Washington's efforts to consolidate alliances in the region in preparation for a US-instigated war against China.

Arriving Monday, Austin met first with Lee, then Yoon on Tuesday. He made clear that not only did Washington's alliance with South Korea remain "ironclad," but that the US would also ramp up its military presence in the region in coordination with Seoul. He emphasized once again that the full range of Washington's destructive capabilities were being deployed to the region, in a thinly veiled threat to China and North Korea.

Austin stated at a joint press conference with Lee, "The United States stands firm in its extended deterrence commitment, and that includes the full range of US defense capabilities, including our conventional, nuclear, and missile defense capabilities. Now, we have 28,500 uniformed personnel in South Korea who proudly work together every day with their ROK [South Korean] counterparts. That's one of the largest US troop deployments around the world."

Austin's visit to Seoul has nothing to do with defense. It is to ensure that the Yoon administration is working in lockstep with the US in pursuit of the latter's strategic goals in Northeast Asia, directed above all against China. This means greater collaboration between the two countries' militaries, including on the deployment of the strategic and nuclear assets to the Korean Peninsula in the event of war.

Referencing recent past measures taken by the US, Austin stated, "We deployed fifth-generation aircraft, F-22s, F-35s, and also deployed a carrier strike group to visit the peninsula." He continued, "You can look for more of that kind of activity going forward. But in addition to that, you can look to see deeper consultation between our two countries and that leadership."

This comes after President Yoon made remarks last month about joint planning and coordination with Washington on the use of US nuclear weapons in an interview with the *Chosun Ilbo* newspaper. He went further in a statement released on January 12, supposedly over the North Korean threat, declaring, "If the issue becomes more serious, we could acquire our own nuclear weapons, such as deploying tactical nuclear weapons here in South Korea."

This was the first time a South Korean president has publicly made such a declaration, though Seoul has previously had a nuclear weapons program. During the Park Chung-hee regime in the 1970s, Seoul worked in secret to develop nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles capable of delivering a nuclear payload. Seoul only gave up these programs under pressure from Washington.

Yoon later walked back his comments in an interview with the *Wall Street Journal* published on January 19, stating instead, "We are preparing a stronger joint planning and joint execution in operating the US nuclear assets on the Korean Peninsula."

For Washington, all of this provides the opportunity for deepening its nuclear planning for a war with China while integrating Seoul closer into these plans. The US intends to draw South Korea as well as Japan into a tighter trilateral alliance that includes increased intelligence sharing and coordination to complement its other alliances in the region, including the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), which includes the US, Japan, Australia, and India; and the AUKUS pact comprised of Australia, the United Kingdom and the

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At the same time, Yoon is increasingly confrontational with North Korea. He has threatened to suspend a 2018 agreement with Pyongyang that is meant to reduce clashes along the border. The agreement bars hostilities in the border area, which includes guard posts, propaganda speakers, and live-fire drills. Moon Jang-ryeol, an adviser in the previous Moon Jae-in administration stated that under Yoon, "We are now on the verge of military conflict with North Korea."

While speaking in private with Yoon and Lee, Austin no doubt worked out a plan to further integrate Seoul into Washington's nuclear war planning. When asked directly by a reporter Tuesday about South Korea obtaining its own nuclear weapons, Austin reiterated that the two sides would continue to work together to strengthen the US "extended deterrence." This, however, already includes US and South Korea tabletop exercises this month to coordinate the allies' planning, which would include nuclear scenarios.

In a Tuesday piece written for South Korea's Yonhap News Agency titled "The Alliance Stands Ready," Austin stated the two sides "are expanding the scope and scale of our combined exercises." He added that the two sides will plan "visits to US strategic [that is, nuclear] sites housing our most advanced capabilities to demonstrate the role these capabilities may play in crisis or conflict." Austin called the US-South Korean alliance one of the most "interoperable, and adaptable alliances in history."

Significantly, South Korea is also working to expand alliances, not just with the US and Japan, but with Europe. On January 27, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg gave an interview to Yonhap, shortly before arriving in South Korea last Sunday for a two-day visit. He stated, "The most important message is that I strongly believe that we need to strengthen the partnership between [South] Korea and NATO because security becomes more and more interconnected. What happens in Asia, the Indo-Pacific, matters for Europe and NATO, and vice versa."

As justification for NATO's expansion into Asia, Stoltenberg went on to denounce China, claiming "China is also coercing and intimidating countries, for instance in the South China Sea region, and it matters for global trade and for the freedom of navigation." He is simply repeating Washington's propaganda used to justify US military provocations in the South China Sea and its military build-up throughout the region.

Backing this war drive, Seoul is working closer with the alliance, establishing a diplomatic mission to NATO in Brussels last November. Yoon became the first South Korean president to attend a NATO summit last June.

Ultimately, neither Washington nor any of its partners are concerned about peace in the Indo-Pacific region. The US consolidation of these treaties and alliances is above all aimed at planning for war against China even as it is rapidly escalating its war against Russia in Ukraine.

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