

South Korea's Democrats stoke nationalism to obscure growing danger of war

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The summit last month between South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol and Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida has led to an outpouring of anti-Japanese chauvinism from South Korea's main opposition Democratic Party of Korea (DP). This is to obscure the Democrats' role in attacking workers' social conditions while covering up their support for the developing US-led war drive against China.

In waging this campaign, the Democrats are attempting to posture as advocates for victims of Japanese imperialism, which had colonized Korea from 1910 to 1945. On April 4, DP members criticized a statement made by Prime Minister Han Deok-su the previous day when he stated during a session of the National Assembly that the summit between Yoon and Kishida had "removed the obstacle" to closer relations between Seoul and Tokyo.

This "obstacle" is a lawsuit by 15 victims of forced labor under the Japanese colonial government. In 2018, the South Korean Supreme Court ruled in favor of the plaintiffs and ordered Nippon Steel and Mitsubishi Heavy Industries to compensate the victims. In response, the Japanese government imposed trade restrictions on South Korea, with Seoul retaliating by threatening to pull out of the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) bilateral military intelligence sharing agreement.

In March, prior to the summit, the Yoon administration approved a plan to compensate the plaintiffs from a private domestic fund, without the involvement of the Japanese firms or government. Only three of the plaintiffs are alive today with the families of the others representing their cases.

In an interview with SBS radio, DP member Yun Yeong-deok attacked the prime minister, saying, "It sounds like [Han] is saying that the surviving victims

refusing the third-party compensation are obstacles, that they are causing trouble, but this sounds like something that the Japanese prime minister would say, not the prime minister of the Republic of Korea."

The outcome of improved relations between Seoul and Tokyo is the stepping up of war planning between Seoul and Tokyo bilaterally and with Washington trilaterally, aimed at stoking a conflict with China. The Democrats, however, support the military alliance with the US and have not opposed Washington's anti-China war drive.

The Seoul-Tokyo dispute had cut across US military preparations in the region, resulting in Washington applying pressure to both Seoul and Tokyo to resolve the issues. President Yoon came to office pledging to rebuild the relationship with Japan. He has also resumed massive joint war games with the US while pushing for increased cooperation between Seoul and Washington over US nuclear weapons on the Korean Peninsula.

Washington is now pushing for even further collaboration between its two allies and the US, with Kurt Campbell, the deputy assistant to the president and National Security Council coordinator for the Indo-Pacific, praising Yoon. "We [Washington] are hoping, however, that we will see even more from both capitals going forward. And again, as I said... we will be engaged accordingly," he said on March 30.

It is not the danger of nuclear war that has provoked the ire of the Democrats. Instead, they have targeted Yoon from the right, promoting nationalism as a means of distracting the public from the DP's own support for US war planning. That is what is behind their supposed concern for the victims of forced labor under Japanese colonial rule.

On March 29, the DP submitted a request for a

parliamentary investigation into the Yoon-Kishida summit. Two days later, DP lawmaker Yun Jae-gap declared in an interview, “As issues related to comfort women, Dokdo, and marine products from Fukushima come out in the Japanese press, we must know what is the truth at the center of this. We must identify the issues at stake for the national interest and the people’s safety.”

Comfort women is a euphemism for sex slaves used by the Japanese military during World War II, while the South Korean-controlled Dokdo Islets (known as Takeshima in Japan), located in the Sea of Japan, have been at the center of a territorial dispute between Seoul and Tokyo for decades.

In reality, the Democrats are no more concerned about public safety or the fate of the working class in South Korea than the ruling People Power Party. On Wednesday, the US and South Korea held joint air drills involving a US B-52 bomber and fighter jets from both countries. Trilateral naval drills were held for two days on April 3 and 4 with Japan, involving the USS Nimitz aircraft carrier.

The Democrats have not issued a word of criticism of these belligerent exercises taking place on China’s doorstep. These drills increasingly raise the risk of conflict, in which South Korea would be on the front lines.

Furthermore, the previous administration of Democrat Moon Jae-in coordinated closely with both the Trump and Biden governments while in office from 2017-2022. Moon gave his approval for the installation of Washington’s Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) missile battery in South Korea after having falsely postured as an opponent of the system before being elected. THAAD is a key component of US war plans and includes an AN/TPY-2 X-band radar capable of spying deep into Chinese territory.

Then, shortly after Trump threatened to “totally destroy” North Korea in 2017, Moon agreed to and closely coordinated with the US on the provocative flight of two US B-1B Lancer bombers off the coast of the Korean Peninsula, flying the farthest north of the Demilitarized Zone, up to that point, in the 21st century.

During his first two years in office, Moon and the Democrats made no attempt to abrogate GSOMIA, and caved to US pressure in 2019 not to pull out of it when

Seoul threatened to do so as part of the trade dispute with Japan. The GSOMIA agreement between South Korea and Japan, which hosts two US X-band radars as well, facilitates intelligence sharing between the two as part of the US ballistic missile systems in the region.

Moon also backed the Biden administration over Taiwan, which the US is attempting to exploit in order to stoke a war with China. Following a summit in Washington in May 2021, the two leaders included a reference to the island in a joint statement between the two countries for the first time, an act that only further raised tensions with Beijing.

The Democrat leaders understand very well the US pressure behind the summit between Yoon and Kishida in Tokyo. Their nationalist grandstanding has nothing to do with warning about, let alone opposing, a US-led war against China in which both South Korea and Japan are called upon to play major roles.



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