

US leads multilateral Cobra Gold military exercises in Thailand

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1 March 2024

The US and Thailand have begun the 43rd annual Cobra Gold military exercises, the largest multinational drills in Southeast Asia involving nearly 10,000 troops in total. The latest iteration includes the largest contingent of US troops in a decade amid Washington's ratcheting up of tensions with China.

The opening ceremony of Cobra Gold took place on February 27 in Rayong Province Thailand, southeast of Bangkok. Drills will run through to March 10 and will involve live fire exercises and a simulated command post exercise in Rayong and other provinces across Thailand, including Lopburi, Chanthaburi, and Sa Kaeo.

There are seven full participants in Cobra Gold this year including Thailand, the US, Singapore, Indonesia, Japan, South Korea, and Malaysia. Speaking at the opening ceremony were US ambassador to Thailand Robert F. Godec, the commander of US I Corps Lieutenant General Xavier Brunson, and Thailand's Chief of Defence Forces General Songwit Noonpakdee.

US involvement has increased to the largest size in a decade since Thailand's 2014 military coup. Over 4,500 US troops are taking part in the war exercises, an increase from 3,800 last year and 1,300 in 2022, with the lower figures in part due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Prior to the coup, over 7,000 US personnel were involved in the drills.

Different aspects of Cobra Gold include the Field Training Exercises (FTX) and the Command Post Exercise (CPX). The former incorporates the army, navy, and air force and will include airborne operations, live-fire exercises, and amphibious landings. CPX will train participants in combat in various domains, including land, sea, air, space, and cyberspace.

These drills also involve the operation of the High Mobility Artillery Rocket System (HIMARS), light

rockets capable of attacking targets at a range of 300km. HIMARS have been used to arm Ukraine in the US-NATO proxy war against Russia. Washington is also supplying HIMARS to Taiwan, where the US is attempting to provoke a war with China as it did with Russia in Ukraine.

The US representatives attempted to dress Cobra Gold up as a necessity for ensuring regional stability. In reality, the exercises do the exact opposite as US imperialism targets China. Godec, for example, wrote on Twitter/X on the opening of the war games, "Together, with our regional allies and partners, we work together to ensure a free and open Indo-Pacific."

The reference to "a free and open Indo-Pacific" is a thinly veiled denunciation used to demonise Beijing for refusing to acquiesce to US hegemony in Asia. The slogan in reality means the military encirclement of China which threatens a naval blockade of vital shipping routes including through the Malacca Strait that would strangle Beijing economically.

Godec's remarks make clear that whatever Washington's diplomatic window dressing, the Cobra Gold exercises are aimed at preparing for war with China and incorporating its allies in the region into those plans. All of this is taking place on China's doorstep.

Furthermore, Washington's attacks on China reek of hypocrisy. For the US, "free and open," as well as "rule of law," mean the freedom for US imperialism to exploit the world for its own interests under conditions of its economic decline. This includes waging bloody and illegal wars of aggression in the Middle East over the past three decades, including now the Biden administration's complete support for Israel's ongoing genocide in Gaza.

In addition to the main participants, another 23

countries are taking part to a limited extent. They include other US allies such as Australia, New Zealand, France, the United Kingdom, Germany, and Sweden. China is also participating for the 11th consecutive year, though only in tabletop humanitarian assistance drills.

The limited role played by China is bound up with two conflicting aspects. On the one hand, the US would no doubt prefer to exclude China altogether. On the other, Thailand is engaged in a balancing act between Washington and Beijing, looking to maintain its longstanding diplomatic and economic relations with the latter, its largest trading partner. Two-way trade between the two Asian countries reached \$US135 billion in 2023.

However, Washington is working towards the strategic goal of incorporating Thailand into its war planning. Thailand is an historic ally of the US and during the Vietnam War was used as a base to host some 50,000 US troops and stage bombing runs throughout Indochina.

Cobra Gold grew out of this relationship following US imperialism's defeat in Vietnam. Established in 1982, the exercises were aimed at allowing Washington to continue to exert its influence in the region while threatening Vietnam and more recently China.

Other Washington-led military drills are taking place on a regular basis throughout the region. Occurring at the same time as Cobra Gold, the US and Japan began Exercise Iron Fist on February 25 between US Marines and the Japanese Ground Self-Defense Force and Maritime Self-Defense Force, the formal names for Japan's army and navy respectively. The exercises, which conclude on March 17, are taking place around Japan's islands of Kyushu and Okinawa in the East China Sea.

The US is also encouraging allies like the Philippines to heighten territorial disputes with China. On February 25, Manila accused the Chinese coast guard of blocking one of its government vessels from resupplying fuel to Filipino fishermen near the disputed Scarborough Shoal, the second such instance in two weeks. The shoal is a triangular feature of rocks and atolls 240 miles west of Luzon, the largest island in the Philippines.

These disputes in the South China Sea have been whipped up by Washington and exploited in order to

place pressure on Beijing, falsely accusing China of "unilaterally" overturning the status quo. Beijing, conscious of US efforts, regards the South China Sea, including the Scarborough Shoal, as one of its "core interests" to be defended by force if necessary. Beijing, in other words, is unwilling to allow itself to be surrounded by US imperialism and its allies.

In April, the US and the Philippines will hold Balikatan 2024, another set of joint war games, which may take place in the Batanes Archipelago, just 150km from Taiwan. This highly provocative action is slated to be larger than last year's event which drew 17,000 troops including 12,000 from the US.

In this context, the Cobra Gold exercises are part of Washington's overall effort strengthen military alliances and strategic partnerships throughout the Indo-Pacific in preparation for war against China. Under conditions where the US is already at war with Russia in Ukraine and alongside Israel is fueling a wider conflict in the Middle East, war with China would quickly spiral into a catastrophic global conflict.



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