

# US, South Korea conduct huge war games on Korean Peninsula

Ben McGrath  
12 March 2024

The United States and South Korea have been holding large-scale annual military exercises this past week known as Freedom Shield. While supposedly directed at the so-called North Korean “threat,” the drills are part of Washington’s preparations for war with China.

The exercises, which began on March 4 and will end on March 14, involve both live-fire drills as well as computer warfare simulations on land and sea, and in air, cyberspace and space. In addition to the US and South Korea, 11 other countries are participating: Australia, Belgium, Canada, Colombia, France, Greece, Italy, New Zealand, the Philippines, Thailand, and the United Kingdom.

The Freedom Shield exercises are one of two major annual drills held on the Korean Peninsula, with the other held in August called Ulchi Freedom Shield. The drills typically involve tens of thousands of troops from both countries. While neither Washington nor Seoul announced the exact number of troops participating in the war games, it has been reported that double the figure from last year are taking part with the number of individual drills also rising from 23 to 48.

One drill was a heavily publicized “elephant walk” involving 33 US and South Korean fighter jets last Friday. The exercise involves fully-armed aircraft taxiing in formation down a runway in preparation to take off. It involved F-35A stealth fighters as well as KF-16, F-15KS, and F-4E fighter jets.

The growth of the Freedom Shield exercises is bound up with the escalating confrontation with China. This is occurring even as Washington and NATO expand the US-instigated conflict with Russia in Ukraine and continue to back the genocide Israel is carrying out in Gaza that threatens the entire Middle East. Rather than attempting to reduce tensions in the Indo-Pacific, US

imperialism is attempting to resolve the ever-growing economic crisis it faces through the only methods at its disposal—militarism and war.

The brief respite in tensions on the Korean Peninsula followed the 2018 summit between President Donald Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un—North Korea agreed to suspend nuclear and long-range missile testing in return for a halt to major US-South Korean war games. Washington, however, sabotaged the deal by refusing to negotiate with Pyongyang unless it fully acquiesced to US demands.

Trump’s vague agreement with Kim was never about reducing the danger of war, but attempting to cajole and bully Pyongyang into distancing itself from China. Failing that, Washington under Biden effectively scuttled the deal and resumed the full-scale massive war games, though the US never completely halted joint military drills.

In regards to the current drills, the South Korean Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) announced prior to their start that Freedom Shield would be “a realistic exercise to strengthen the allies’ combined defense capabilities based on scenarios reflecting diverse security threats and lessons learned from recent wars.”

The last point is particularly significant. Falsely couched as defensive, the US and its allies are drawing lessons from Washington’s past and ongoing wars in preparation for conflict with China. Just as the US and NATO goaded Russia into war over Ukraine, the US and its allies, including South Korea and Japan, are similarly attempting to provoke a war with Beijing, above all over Taiwan.

South Korea’s JCS also noted: “There will be a variety of combined field training exercises in sea-land-air to increase interoperability and enhance the combined operation capabilities of the alliance.” The

focus on “interoperability” is not simply a matter of joint operations. In the case of South Korea, the US takes operational control of South Korea’s huge military in the event of war.

War games provocatively held on China’s doorstep have become regular occurrences in the Indo-Pacific. They include the recent Cobra Gold drills in Thailand and Exercise Iron Fist with Japan in the East China Sea that began in February. The Balikatan drills next month with the Philippines are expected to take place near Taiwan, which will only raise tensions with Beijing.

In January, the US also held trilateral naval drills with South Korea and Japan that included an American aircraft carrier. This is part of the de facto military alliance between Washington, Seoul and Tokyo, to which the three sides agreed during last August’s war summit at Camp David in the US.

There is no widespread support for war with China or North Korea within South Korea or the US. To drag the populations into war both Washington and Seoul falsely claim they represent “democracy” and “rule of law” in contrast to Beijing’s “authoritarianism.”

In South Korea, the Yoon Suk-yeol administration is working to justify the growing war planning as well as its military alliance with Japan which is taking part under the direction of Washington. On March 1, marking the 105th anniversary of the Independence Movement in Korea that fought against Japanese colonial rule, Yoon hailed Seoul’s military cooperation with Tokyo as a supposed defense of freedom while denouncing North Korea.

Yoon declared, “Sharing the values of freedom, human rights, and the rule of law, our two countries have become partners in the pursuit of common interests for global peace and prosperity.” He continued, “The security cooperation between the two countries against North Korea’s nuclear and missile threats has been strengthened further.”

Yoon’s declarations about supporting freedom are utterly hypocritical. His administration has attacked democratic rights in order to carry out its agenda, even denouncing political opponents as North Korean sympathizers. A study released on March 7 by the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Institute, a Sweden-based think tank, reported that South Korea has regressed as a “democracy,” falling from 17th in 2021

to 47th among 179 countries in 2023. It was the only supposed “liberal democracy” to regress to such a degree.

Yoon and the ruling People Power Party have sought to rehabilitate the image of Syngman Rhee, the US puppet and dictator installed in 1948 as the first president of South Korea. He was driven from office in 1960 by mass protests which occurred as a result of Rhee’s oppressive regime.

Yoon declared in his March 1 speech, “The government and I are committed to ensuring that the sacrifices and dedication of our patriotic martyrs in securing the independence, founding, and prosperity of our country are properly honored and remembered by our descendants.”

The South Korean media have interpreted the statement as a defense of Rhee. Yoon is not interested in defending history, but the very opposite; distorting history and praising a figure who not only assisted the US in waging an imperialist war of annihilation against North Korea, but who carried out a terroristic campaign to wipe out political opposition within the South. It underscores the authoritarianism that Yoon is embracing today in the build-up to war with China.



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**