

US, South Korea conduct massive air force drills

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The US and South Korea on Friday began annual air force drills, the largest of their kind on the Korean Peninsula. While both governments maintain that this and other military exercises are directed at the supposed North Korean “threat,” the drills are aimed at preparing the two militaries for a US-led war against China.

Dubbed Korea Flying Training (KFT), the drills involve approximately 25 different types of warplanes and around 100 aircraft in total. These include US F-35B and South Korean F-35A stealth fighter jets, unmanned MQ-9 Reaper Predator drones, refueling tankers, and transport planes. The exercises will run from April 12 to 26. Personnel from the US Army and Marine Corps are also taking part in the war games.

The US’s Seventh Air Force Director of Operations and Plans Colonel Charles G. Cameron stated, “This exercise provides the most realistic opportunity for our forces to rehearse tactics through difficult training scenarios while learning from each other to strengthen our defensive posture in the region.” He added, “Our ability to train together at this scope enhances interoperability and enables our forces to be ready for any potential situations.” The Seventh Air Force is based in South Korea.

Without directly naming China, Cameron’s comments demonstrate that these drills are part of broader war planning throughout the Indo-Pacific. The exercises are taking place out of the US Kunsan Air Base in the city of Gunsan, 178 kilometers south of Seoul. Any war with China would immediately put these South Korean bases on the front lines. The Kunsan base is just 950 kilometers from Beijing and 198 kilometers from the North Korean border. In addition, the headquarters of Russia’s Pacific Fleet near Vladivostok and the nuclear facilities of both China and Russia are in easy range.

The focus on “interoperability” is also not simply a matter of joint operations. In the event of war, the US takes operational control of South Korea’s massive military. At present, there are approximately 28,500 US troops stationed in South Korea, which also fields its own huge, heavily-armed military of around 500,000 active troops.

The KFT drills are one of two large-scale aerial war games that take place annually between the US and South Korea. However, there are many other exercises that not only routinely take place, but are expanding as US-instigated conflicts unfold around the world. Just last month, the US and South Korea conducted one of their largest overall drills, the Freedom Shield exercises, involving tens of thousands of troops. It also involved the participation of 11 other countries including the United Kingdom and the Philippines.

Last Thursday in Washington, officials from the US Defense Department and the South Korean Defense Ministry held their 24th Korea-US Integrated Defense Dialogue in which they agreed to hold a tabletop exercise on nuclear weapon planning concurrently for the first time with the upcoming Ulchi Freedom Shield war games in August.

The decision is part of the growing nuclear weapon cooperation between the US and South Korea. At their summit last year, Presidents Joe Biden and Yoon Suk-yeol agreed to establish the Nuclear Consultative Group to give Seoul a larger role in how US nuclear weapons are used.

According to a joint press statement, during the talks last week, the two sides also “stressed the importance of trilateral cooperation with Japan” and “of preserving peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait.” While trying to paint Beijing as the aggressor in the region, Washington is actively working to strengthen alliances

throughout the region as it goads China into a war over Taiwan by undermining the One China policy. As a result, Seoul and Tokyo have increased military cooperation over the past year.

Last week, trilateral drills between the US, South Korea, and Japan also took place in the East China Sea, south of Jeju Island at the end of the Korean Peninsula. The exercises involved six warships, including the US aircraft carrier Theodore Roosevelt. It is one of two carrier strike groups currently in the region, with the USS Ronald Reagan operating out of its base in Yokosuka, Japan.

US imperialism's accelerating preparations for war with China take place as it ramps up the US-NATO war with Russia in Ukraine and backs Israel to the hilt as its genocidal war in Gaza inflames tensions throughout the Middle East. That region is on the brink of a far wider war after Iran retaliated against Israel over the Israeli attack on the Iranian embassy in Syria on April 1.

The Theodore Roosevelt strike group is continuing its operations in the East China Sea, provocatively near the Chinese mainland. If China were to hold such naval maneuvers anywhere near the US coastline, the response from the US political and media establishment would be an eruption of self-righteous indignation and warmongering.

The US is again deliberating raising tensions with China with the upcoming Balikatan war games beginning on April 22 between the US and the Philippines around the Batanes Islands in the Bashi Channel. The channel is a strategic sea lane between the Philippines and Taiwan, connecting the South China Sea with the wider Pacific Ocean and used by the Chinese navy. South Korea, Japan, and 12 other countries are set to participate as observers.

The US has supplied Taiwan with large amounts of military aid, including direct foreign military funding for the first time last August. This is something typically only provided to sovereign nations and is another challenge to the One China policy. In its recent \$US825 billion war budget, Washington also earmarked \$US300 million in direct military funding for Taiwan.

Beijing has made repeatedly clear that Taiwan is a redline: if Taipei were to declare or Washington were to recognize Taiwanese independence, it would lead to war. Taiwan was part of China prior to being carved

out by the imperialist powers in the 19th century. Beijing is conscious that allowing Taiwan to be split off from China would set a precedent for a new imperialist division of the country and allow the US to turn Taiwan into a military base just off the Chinese mainland.

This is the war that South Korea and Japan have signed up for behind the backs of their respective populations as they continue to claim that their various military drills are purely "defensive" and supposedly aimed at deterring North Korea.



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