

New South Korean president continues war planning with US, Japan

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Military leaders from South Korea, Japan, and the US met in Seoul last Friday to coordinate military preparations in the accelerating build-up to war against China. It was the first such high-level meeting under new South Korean President Lee Jae-myung, who is following the same militarist agenda as his right-wing predecessor, who was impeached and removed from office after a failed military coup attempt last year.

In attendance were South Korea's Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Kim Myeong-su, Japan's Chief of Staff, Joint Staff Yoshihide Yoshida, and the US Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Dan Caine. Dubbed the Trilateral Chiefs of Defense (Tri-CHOD) meeting, it was the 22nd such gathering and the first to take place in Seoul. Caine is also the highest-level US military figure to visit South Korea since his predecessor General Charles Brown in November 2023.

The three released a joint statement that specifically denounced North Korea though avoided direct mention of China. It condemned North Korea's "continued development of unlawful nuclear and ballistic missile programs" and accused Pyongyang of destabilizing the region.

According to the right-wing *Chosun Ilbo* newspaper, a South Korean government official confirmed that Seoul had left direct references to China and Taiwan out of the statement. Instead, it blandly reaffirmed that "trilateral security cooperation has played a key role in promoting peace and prosperity on the Korean Peninsula and in the Indo-Pacific."

In separate remarks, Caine made clear that Beijing was the focus of the meeting, saying, "The DPRK [North Korea] and China are undergoing an unprecedented military buildup with a clear and unambiguous intent to move forward with their own agendas."

This turns reality on its head. For the past 15 years since the Obama administration first announced its "pivot to Asia," Washington has conducted a huge military buildup throughout the Indo-Pacific. This has included strengthening a system of military alliances surrounding China while continually attempting to goad Beijing into war, above all over Taiwan. Washington has had the backing of Seoul and Tokyo.

At the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore in May, US Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth accused Beijing of preparing to invade Taiwan by 2027. He demanded that allies in the Asia-Pacific raise military spending to 5 percent of GDP, an issue that was no doubt discussed again last Friday.

For Seoul, this means more than doubling military spending from its current rate of 2.3 percent this year, at a time when the economy is stagnating. Japan has already been in the process of doubling its own military spending to 2 percent GDP by 2027, but for now has rejected further increases.

Far from pursuing peace, US imperialism is plunging towards global conflict, waging war against Russia in Ukraine and backing Israel's genocide in Gaza and expanding war throughout the Middle East. Friday's meeting took place only three weeks after Washington carried out the illegal bombing of Iran under the phony claims that Tehran was building a nuclear weapon and supposedly "threatened" the region.

The new South Korean administration has not criticized the Trump administration and even appears to hold out the possibility of reducing tensions with Beijing and Pyongyang.

On the same day as the Tri-CHOD meeting, the three countries held joint air force exercises that included a US B-52H bomber, capable of carrying both nuclear and conventional weapons. Carried out on China's

doorstep, it was the first deployment of the US strategic bomber to the Korean Peninsula in 2025. The exercises took place off the southern coast of South Korea's Jeju Island.

US, South Korean and Japanese military leaders on Friday agreed to hold major trilateral exercises this September known as Freedom Edge—the third iteration of these war games. Freedom Edge is multi-domain and includes air, naval, and cyber security drills.

Lee is continuing the policies of his right-wing predecessor Yoon Suk-seol. Under Yoon, tensions with China and North Korea grew substantially as he worked hand-in-hand with Washington. Undoubtedly, millions voted for Lee falsely assuming he would pursue a less hostile agenda towards South Korea's neighbors.

During the Yoon administration, South Korea agreed to work closely with the US in planning the use of nuclear weapons. Yoon played a central role in forging closer relations with Tokyo by sweeping aside longstanding historical issues between the two countries, including crimes committed by Japanese imperialism during its colonization of Korea.

This led to the forging of a de facto trilateral military alliance between the three countries in August 2023 during a meeting between Yoon with US President Joe Biden and Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida at Camp David near Washington.

Lee was quick to confirm his adherence to the alliance. Shortly after his election on June 3, the South Korean military held its first trilateral exercise with the US and Japan under the Lee administration with air drills involving South Korean F-15K, Japanese F-2, and US F-16 fighter jets.

If Lee appears to be less antagonistic towards China and North Korea, it is for two reasons. First, South Korea's Democrats have long sought closer relations with Pyongyang as a means of economically opening up the North to exploitation as a source of resources and ultra-cheap labor. This was the basis for the so-called "Sunshine Policy" initiated during the Democrat administration of Kim Dae-jung (1998-2003).

Similarly, the Democrats also represent sections of the South Korean ruling class that favor closer relations with Beijing to further their business interests. China is South Korea's largest trading partner.

Secondly, the Democrats are acutely aware of the widespread anti-war sentiment in South Korea. A poll

last October for example found that 82 percent of people were opposed to South Korea sending military aid to Ukraine.

Despite their occasional posturing, Lee and the Democrats do not offer any solution to the danger of war in the Indo-Pacific. Like Yoon, Lee is adhering to the same pro-war agenda of US imperialism.



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