

South Korea moves towards joining war against Iran

Ben McGrath
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An attack on a South Korean-operated shipping vessel in the Strait of Hormuz last week is being seized upon by the political establishment in Seoul to provide the rationale to join the US-led war against Iran. This is despite the fact that no direct evidence of Iran's involvement has been presented.

On Sunday, after a brief, initial investigation the previous Monday, the government of President Lee Jae-myung claimed that the ship had been struck by two "unidentified airborne objects." Two objects supposedly struck the ship, the *Namu*, in succession, leaving a seven-meter-wide gash in the hull. No casualties were reported among the 24-member crew. Debris from the explosion is being taken to Seoul for further investigation.

The *Namu* is a Panama-flagged cargo vessel operated by HMM, a South Korean shipping company. After the explosion and fire, it was towed to a port in Dubai last Friday where the investigation took place. It is one of 26 South Korean vessels stranded in the region since the US and Israel launched their illegal war against Iran at the end of February.

The incident came on the same day that the Trump administration began escorting vessels through the Strait of Hormuz while also pressuring Seoul to join the operation as well as the broader war on Iran.

Seoul's national security advisor Wi Seong-rak stated on May 4, the day of the alleged attack, that the government had already been considering joining the US's military operations against Iran. This included the escort operation, a plan Washington subsequently suspended the day after it began.

Since the incident, Washington has renewed calls for Seoul to join the war. Without any evidence, Trump, in his typically incoherent fashion, declared in a social media post, "Iran has taken some shots at unrelated

Nations with respect to the Ship Movement, PROJECT FREEDOM, including a South Korean Cargo Ship. Perhaps it's time for South Korea to come and join the mission!"

However, while Seoul's investigation team claimed the vessel had been struck, it could not identify what the "airborne objects" were. The foreign ministry stated it was not passing judgment on who was responsible for the "attack," though some right-wing lawmakers and so-called security experts have claimed that Iranian state television had taken responsibility for the strike as the vessel had violated Tehran's maritime rules.

Iran's embassy in South Korea has stated, "The Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Iran firmly rejects and categorically denies any allegations regarding the involvement of the armed forces of the Islamic Republic of Iran in the incident involving damage to a Korean vessel in the Strait of Hormuz."

It is not clear what actually happened. The *Namu* could have been struck by Iran. The ship may have been deliberately placed in harm's way to provoke an Iranian military response. It is also possible that the US or Israel carried out the attack to justify South Korea and other countries directly entering the conflict. Regardless, responsibility above all rests entirely with Washington for launching its unprovoked criminal war on Iran.

The timing of the attack coupled with the rapid release of the findings of a short "investigation" before all facts could be confirmed suggest Seoul is seeking to use the incident to step up its military involvement in the Middle East. This is despite the cautious language the Lee administration is using.

After the release of the investigation findings on Sunday, Foreign Ministry spokesman Bak Il stated that a "close review is under way on the issue of joining US

plans, including the Maritime Freedom Construct.”

Should Seoul become an active participant in the war, it would most likely deploy the naval Cheonghae Unit, which was initially deployed to the region around the Horn of Africa in 2009 on the pretext of combatting piracy. In 2020, this unit was also deployed to the Strait of Hormuz in support of the US military build-up in the Middle East under the first Trump administration.

The unit consists of around 300 personnel, including special forces, deployed aboard a destroyer. The unit also operates three high-speed boats and one or two helicopters. The unit is currently undergoing a transition, with the *Wang Geon* destroyer on its way to the region to relieve the current vessel in the unit. The *Wang Geon* was the same vessel deployed to the region in 2020. Before being dispatched in early May, the vessel’s crew underwent additional training with the expectation that it could become involved in the war.

Until now, the South Korean government has been cautious about openly backing the US war. The South Korean economy stands to suffer significant damage despite government claims that the economy is expected to grow by more than 2 percent this year. This is based on first quarter figures of 1.7 percent growth. This was before the full impact of the war had been felt.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* has pointed out, due to oil tankers’ slow speeds, the last vessels that left the Strait of Hormuz before its closing were only just beginning to arrive in Asia in April, meaning that the real impact of the closure may not be felt until this month.

Before the war, South Korea received nearly 70 percent of its oil from the Middle East. Increased fuel prices and inflation have hit the public. Inflation is at a 21-month high, having climbed to 2.6 percent year-on-year. The cost-of-living index has risen even higher to 2.9 percent. Gasoline and diesel prices rose last month by 21.1 percent and 30.8 percent respectively over the previous year.

Sections of the South Korean ruling class see entering the war not only as a method for securing access to oil and natural gas but also of extricating themselves from a growing economic crisis. In particular, President Lee came to office last year pledging to make South Korea the fourth largest weapons exporter in the world. This would include by building further relations with and arming Middle East nations.

This is also bound up with larger plans for war throughout the world. The US has rapidly accelerated plans for war against China in which South Korea is closely involved. These plans include having access to resources like oil as well as securing other supply chains independent of China. South Korea’s involvement in the war would further integrate its military with that of the US in preparation for larger conflicts.



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