

Trump turns screws on South Korea to join Iran war

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In a decision announced out of the blue on social media, US President Trump declared that he ordered the Pentagon to scale back annual joint war games in South Korea—just hours before they were due to start on Monday. Trump’s post not only slammed the drills as costly but signalled a renewal of the attempts during his first term to reach an accommodation with the North Korean regime.

Citing his “very good relationship” with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un, Trump declared that the joint military exercises “send a signal that is totally inappropriate and hostile” to a country that, under his presidency, has been “unthreatening and respectful.” Noting that it was too late to cancel the military exercises completely, he announced that he had ordered their substantial reduction.

While it downplayed Trump’s post and stated that the joint military drills would proceed, Seoul was clearly shocked by the unexpected announcement. Trump’s erratic behaviour, propensity for abrupt policy shifts and overt contempt for foreign leaders will only add to concerns in capitals in Asia and internationally about the value of US alliances.

The Ulchi Freedom Shield military drills that the US and South Korea have been holding since 1976 are aimed at preparing for war against North Korea. Prior to Trump’s last-minute announcement, these major war games were to include 14 exercises over 11 days, involving 18,000 South Korean soldiers as well as US troops and those from US allies. Planned exercises included live fire drills, war gaming, drone attacks, electronic and cyber warfare.

Trump lashed out at South Korea over its refusal to provide military support for the US war of aggression against Iran. “I recently asked the President of South Korea if they would like to join us in the

Denuclearization of the Islamic Republic of Iran, and they said, ‘No thanks!’,” Trump declared in his social media post.

Speaking to reporters on Monday, Trump reiterated his dissatisfaction with South Korean president Lee Jae-myung and indicated that his refusal to supply military forces to the Middle East was a factor in the decision to scale back joint military exercises.

“I said ... we have 39,000 soldiers over there guarding you from Kim Jong Un, your next-door neighbour, and you’re not going to help us on a very easy military operation in Iran? ... I see. Well, why are we involved in helping you?” he told the media. Just as a point of information, the US has 28,500 troops in South Korea.

Far from being a “very easy military operation,” Trump’s war on Iran that he claimed would be over quickly has lasted nearly six months and continues. The Pentagon has had to move military resources from the Indo-Pacific to bolster its forces in the Middle East, including the relocation of parts of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) anti-ballistic missile emplacement in South Korea. The THAAD installation is a key element of the Pentagon’s wider regional anti-missile systems in preparation for war with China.

It was reported last week that the aircraft carrier USS George Washington along with its associated strike group was being deployed to the Middle East. Analyst John Lee with the Korea Risk Group told the *Financial Times* that the move would leave “the western Pacific without an American aircraft carrier for the foreseeable future.”

The *Financial Times* also noted: “Trump officials are increasingly frustrated by what they see as Seoul’s foot-dragging in identifying projects for the \$350 billion of investments it pledged to make in the US in exchange for lower tariffs.”

Trump has given no indication as to why he is seeking to renew talks with North Korea. In his first term of office, Trump paused joint military exercises with South Korea and held three summits with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un. The first, held in Singapore in 2018 to great fanfare, produced little more than photo ops. Talks in 2019 broke down over Trump's insistence on North Korea's denuclearisation without providing guarantees that the crippling US-led economic blockade would be fully lifted.

Trump reportedly told South Korean president Lee in June that he wanted to restart talks with Pyongyang. Last weekend he posted a photo of himself with Kim, bragging that the two leaders "get along GREAT." However, Trump's unilateral decision to wind back joint military drills while hailing Kim threatens to sideline South Korea in any negotiations. North Korea has routinely denounced US-South Korean war games.

The summits in 2018-19 appeared to be aimed at wooing North Korea away from its alliance with China as Trump escalated his economic warfare and military build-up against Beijing. Following the breakdown of talks, Pyongyang has drawn closer to Beijing and Moscow and has sent North Korean troops to fight alongside Russian forces in Ukraine.

South Korea's presidential office said on Monday it hoped Trump's comments would lead to renewed US-North Korean talks. At the same time, however, Lee has indicated that his administration will accelerate plans to assume complete control over the country's military. For decades, the US treated South Korea as little more than a semi-colony and maintained complete control over its huge military. Seoul regained peacetime control of its military in 1994, but operational control (OPCON) remains with the Pentagon in times of war.

On Tuesday, Lee pointedly told a cabinet meeting that Seoul should proceed without disruption with the planned transfer, during his term, of operational control to South Korean forces. At the same time, he was careful to reaffirm the US alliance, saying "strengthening our own capabilities increases our value and necessity as an ally."

In the US political establishment, Trump has faced broad criticism—all from the standpoint that Trump's announcement has damaged US alliances and the strategic interests of US imperialism.

In a statement on Monday, Jack Reed, the top Democrat on the Senate Armed Services Committee, condemned the decision as "inane," saying that it sends a message that "America's commitments are negotiable." Republican Senator Thom Tillis warned that reducing joint exercises with South Korea does nothing more than free up thousands of North Korea's troops" to support Putin's war in Ukraine.

"There is no American interest that I can see in this," said Dan Fried, an assistant secretary of state in the George W. Bush administration. "On all levels it makes no sense. It undermines the South Koreans, undermines the Japanese, frightens the Taiwanese, unnerves NATO and emboldens the Chinese, not to mention the North Koreans."

As Trump thrashes around seeking support for the US war on Iran, his critics condemn not the criminal character of the war but his failure to successfully prosecute it, and the fraying of longstanding alliances. While sharp tactical differences exist, the entire political establishment is committed to the global war that is unfolding in Europe and the Middle East, and the protracted military build-up and war drive against China, which Washington regards as the chief threat to its global dominance.



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