South Korea to expand naval mission in the Middle East

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South Korea's Defense Ministry announced last week that it intends to expand and strengthen its so-called "anti-piracy" naval mission around the Horn of Africa. The move is the latest sign that Seoul is preparing to enter the illegal US-Israeli war against Iran.

Seoul intends to approximately double the area of operations of its Cheonghae Unit, which has been based in Djibouti since 2009 and is currently restricted to the Gulf of Aden between Yemen and Somalia. The new plan expands operations up to the eastern tip of Oman, bringing the unit within a few hundred kilometers of the Strait of Hormuz. The Cheonghae Unit at present consists of a 4,400-ton naval destroyer, helicopter, speedboats, and special forces.

Seoul plans to deploy an additional 75 troops, raising the total to 395, as well as a P-8 maritime patrol aircraft, an explosive ordnance disposal (EOD) team, and unmanned mine-clearing equipment. The Defense Ministry also claims the new deployments will "support efforts to restore freedom of navigation in international shipping routes," the pretext routinely trotted out by Washington to justify its military aggression.

The deployment is expected to be approved by the National Assembly without genuine opposition from President Lee Jae-myung's ruling Democratic Party (DP) or the right-wing People Power Party.

Fearing the response of the working class, the Defense Ministry and the Democrats have been at pains to portray the expanded mission as a necessary measure against piracy and to protect lives. Seoul's participation in Washington's imperialist wars in Afghanistan and Iraq were met with anti-war protests and the war on Iran is also highly unpopular.

According to a Pew Research Center survey released in August, 73 percent of people are dissatisfied with Trump's war against Iran. A survey conducted by Gallop Korea in September showed that 55 percent of people opposed deploying troops to the Strait of Hormuz. Among supporters of the Democrats, 69 percent were opposed to a deployment.

In a bid to defuse opposition, DP spokeswoman Jeon Eun-su claimed, "This is not a deployment to the Strait of Hormuz. Since there has been a threefold increase in pirate activity in the Gulf of Aden, we are not even going as far as the Strait of Hormuz."

While there has been a small increase in piracy according to the International Maritime Bureau (IMB) in October, this translates to 15 cases during the first nine months of 2026 in comparison to three last year and eight in 2024. The IMB states, "While these incidents highlight the continued capability of Somali pirates to target vessels in the region, they are not comparable in scale or reach to the deep-sea piracy operations that characterized the 2008–2013 Somali piracy era."

The Yonhap News Agency quoted an unnamed Defense Ministry official as stating, "The Cheonghae Unit will never participate or interfere in the war." However, the same official also stated that Seoul was planning so-called "post-war" operations in the Strait of Hormuz. "It is not our primary focus, but we did not rule out the possibility and that has been reflected in the operational plans," he said.

In reality, this is precisely Seoul's primary focus, which is why it is sending an EOD team and mine-clearing equipment. South Korea has pledged to Britain, France, and other nations to enable "freedom of navigation" under a "permissive environment," defined publicly as an end to the conflict, or the signing of a bilateral agreement between Washington and Tehran.

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"We have promised to join upon request under those conditions…We cannot enter (the strait) unprepared," the official stated.

Such pledges to stay out of the conflict until an "agreement" is reached are worthless. Seoul is moving military assets into position and no doubt a "change in the situation," a supposed "attack" by Iranian forces, or some other pretext could be seized upon to enter the war directly.

South Korea has been under pressure since the beginning of the war against Iran to join the conflict. US President Trump has regularly expressed his frustration with Seoul for refusing to send troops. In March, Washington curtailed intelligence sharing with Seoul on the spurious grounds that the Lee government had leaked classified information about North Korea. In August, Trump unilaterally shortened the annual joint Ulchi Freedom Shield war games with Seoul at the last minute.

The US military has also questioned whether wartime operational control of South Korea's military can be returned to Seoul, something the Lee administration has called for by the end of his term in 2030. At present, the South Korean military would come under US control in the event of war around the Korean Peninsula.

However, there are other considerations at play. Successive South Korean governments have made military exports a central component of their economic strategies, and President Lee Jae-myung's government is no different. In October 2025, Lee declared he would make South Korea the fourth-largest military exporter in the world, something that has already been achieved. In 2024, South Korea accounted for 3.6 percent of global arms shipments. This rose to 6 percent last year, surpassed by only the US, France, and Israel.

The Gulf States have been a particular focus of these exports, with South Korean-made weaponry being deployed against Iran. South Korean arms sales to the region grew from $US241 million in 2019 to $US747.5 million in 2024. In March, shortly after Washington began its assault on Iran, Seoul's then-Finance Minister Gu Yun-cheol said, "Middle Eastern countries are lining up to buy South Korean missiles right now."

South Korea is also a major supplier of weapons to NATO countries such as Poland. The two countries agreed to military contracts worth approximately $US44.2 billion in 2022. Lee and Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk reaffirmed their commitment to the deal while the latter visited South Korea in April. In July, during a NATO summit in Turkey, Lee reached an agreement with NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte to begin formal negotiations on allowing Seoul to enter NATO's military procurement system.

The South Korean corporate elite profits from the death and destruction being inflicted on Iran, Ukraine, and Gaza as well as plans for the expansion of these wars against Russia and China. However, Seoul faces pressure to do more militarily in order to keep the money flowing.

In an interview with the *Korea Times* in March, Jang Ji-hyang, the director of the Center for Regional Studies at the Asan Institute for Policy Studies, stated, "There is a high chance that those Gulf nations, which are so surprised by the current situation, will go on a massive arms-buying spree after the end of this war. They will not buy arms from (South) Korea if Seoul keeps pretending nothing is happening."

Furthermore, having supplied the weaponry to the Gulf States, Seoul now has a vested interest in ensuring the military defeat of Iran in order to highlight the capabilities of its weaponry to potential buyers amid expanding global conflict.

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