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US, South Korea mount massive joint military exercises

By Peter Symonds

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The US and South Korean militaries yesterday began their annual joint Foal Eagle war games, which entail large-scale drills of land, sea and air forces over the next two months. The related Key Resolve, a largely-computer simulated exercise, will be conducted from March 13 to 23.

Last year's exercises, involving 300,000 South Korean troops and around 17,000 American military personnel backed by warships and warplanes, were billed as the largest-ever. While official figures have yet to be released, a US official in South Korea told the *Nikkei Asian Review* those numbers would be exceeded this year.

The US navy is sending the aircraft carrier, the USS Carl Vinson, and its strike group of two guided-missile destroyers and a guided-missile cruiser, to join the Foal Eagle drills. The US Marine Corps is dispatching sophisticated F-35B stealth fighters from Japan to the Korean Peninsula for the first time. A South Korean official suggested that nuclear-capable strategic bombers, such as B-52s and B-1Bs, could be sent from Guam.

The annual exercises are dress rehearsals for war with North Korea and have always raised tensions on the Korean Peninsula. The massive show of force this year takes place amid an already tense stand-off over North Korea's nuclear and missile testing and unsubstantiated accusations that it was responsible for killing Kim Jong-nam, the half-brother of North Korean leader Kim Jong-un.

American and South Korean officials routinely describe the annual exercises as defensive. However, in 2015 the two countries changed their operational plan for fighting war with North Korea from nominally defensive to “pre-emptive” or aggressive. OPLAN 5015, which reportedly includes pre-emptive strikes on North Korean nuclear, missile and military sites as well as “decapitation raids” on the North Korean leadership, was the basis for the 2016 joint exercises and will be for this year’s. In the event of war with North Korea, the US military would also assume overall command of South Korean military forces.

North Korean leader Kim Jong-un responded by visiting an army unit headquarters. He praised the troops for their vigilance and ordered them to “set up thorough countermeasures of a merciless strike against the enemy’s sudden air assault.” Far from defending the North Korean people, the regime’s militaristic declarations and military build-up play directly into the hands of the US and heighten the danger of war.

US Defence Secretary James Mattis told his South Korean counterpart Han Min-koo the US “remains steadfast in its commitment” to South Korea’s defence. He warned that any North Korean attack on the US or its allies would be defeated and any use of nuclear weapons would be met with an “effective and overwhelming” response.

A South Korean defence ministry official told the *Korea Times*: “The phone conversation was intended to send a more effective warning to North Korea over its nuclear and ballistic missile provocations on the occasion of the drills.” Defence Minister Han “stressed the need to bolster the drills.”

Agence France Presse reported that dozens of protesters gathered outside the US embassy in Seoul yesterday to oppose the war games, saying they would “bring the peninsula sharply closer to the brink of nuclear war.”

The expansion of the South Korean-US drills in recent years is not primarily directed against North Korea. It is part of the US military build-up throughout the region against China. This began under the Obama administration’s “pivot to Asia” and is accelerating under Trump, who has threatened trade war measures against Beijing and action against China in the South China Sea.

During his phone call, Mattis welcomed a land-swap deal reached on Tuesday between the South Korean government and the Lotte Group conglomerate that clears the way for the installation of a Terminal High Altitude Area Defence (THAAD) anti-ballistic missile battery on the Korean Peninsula. Mattis and Han agreed to complete the deployment “promptly”, fuelling speculation it could be completed as early as May.

The THAAD battery in South Korea is part of a wider US anti-missile system nominally directed against North Korea, but in reality aimed at preparing for nuclear war with China. The US has never renounced the use of a first nuclear strike and the THAAD system is designed to neutralise Chinese nuclear retaliation.

Beijing has repeatedly protested against the THAAD installation. The Chinese foreign ministry this week declared that the anti-missile system “jeopardises the strategic security interests” in the region and warned of “consequences” if Seoul and Washington proceeded.

Chinese state-owned media outlets have threatened a boycott of South Korean goods. An editorial in the *Global Times* on Tuesday proposed that Chinese society “should coordinate voluntarily in expanding restrictions on South Korean cultural goods and entertainment exports to China, and block them when necessary.” The official Xinhua news agency suggested Chinese consumers should target the Lotte Group.

The Trump administration has no intention of backing off, however. A senior administration official told reporters on Tuesday that Trump regards North Korea and its nuclear program as the “greatest immediate threat” to the United States. The US president met with Chinese State Councillor Yang Jiechi on Monday and again demanded that Beijing take action to force North Korea to end its nuclear and missile program.

The *Wall Street Journal* reported yesterday that an internal White House review of US strategy towards North Korea “includes the possibility of military force or regime change” to deal with the alleged nuclear threat. “US officials have underscored the possible military dimensions of their emerging strategy in recent discussions with allies, according to people familiar with the talks,” the article added.

Despite the fact that Malaysian authorities are yet to complete their investigation, the killing of Kim Jong-nam at the Kuala Lumpur international airport on March 12 is being exploited to heighten the scare campaign against North Korea. With many unanswered questions still remaining, South Korea, backed by the US, is claiming that North Korea used a “weapon of mass destruction”—the nerve agent VX—to kill Kim.

Unnamed American officials told the *Asia Times* they were concerned the US had focussed on North Korea’s nuclear arsenal and not paid sufficient attention to its chemical and biological weapons. A senior Pentagon official said he feared most “a surprise attack on Seoul, Tokyo or American forces stationed in Asia” if North Korea ever felt its existence threatened. “At that point, we won’t be worrying about just nuclear weapons but lots of different weapons that could kill a lot of people, millions even. We need to be ready,” he said.

The growing hysteria over North Korea in the US and international media is aimed at creating the climate for reckless moves against Pyongyang, including pre-emptive military strikes against its nuclear and missile sites. The huge military exercises in South Korea only heighten the danger that an incident or provocation could spiral out of control.