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European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

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13.08.2021

Time to Suspend the US-ROK Joint Military Exercises?



After a protracted 13-month suspension, North and South Korea have resumed their twice daily inter-Korea hotline calls, returning to a collaboration venue meant to increase transparency and manage the risk of conflict along one of the world's most heavily militarized borders. In the absence of a peace treaty, such lines of communication are critical to preventing routine incidents from spiraling out of control and triggering an armed exchange.

While the resumption of regular communications between the two Koreas might be thought to signal potential progress toward regional reconciliation, perennial US dominance of inter-Korean relations makes this far from a foregone conclusion. After

three rounds of US-North Korea summits, the Trump administration intensified rather than softened its maximum pressure campaign against the North and blocked Seoul's attempts to implement inter-Korean agreements on exchange and cooperation. The new Biden administration, in spite of promising a more "practical and calibrated" policy toward the North, has made it clear that peace negotiations are not a top priority. Meanwhile, amid the ongoing cycle of US – North Korea tensions, experts warn that the intensifying regional rivalry in East Asia between the US and China is increasing the risk of conflict between the US and the nuclear-armed North. American dominance of South Korea, which has remained under virtual US military occupation for seven decades, guarantees that Seoul would be on the front line of any such conflict.

Washington has historically dismissed inter-Korean engagement as a sideshow, derided by US hawks and their conservative collaborators in South Korea, who react to any signs of progress with maximalist aggressiveness. Inter-Korean reconciliation is perceived as a threat to the network of interconnected US interests that works to perpetuate the permanent state of war in the Korean peninsula, which in turn rationalizes the ongoing military occupation of the South as a forward US base against China. According to Tim Beal:

Imperialism is the central characteristic of U.S. foreign policy, but is neither mentioned nor admitted by the establishment... The military-industrial complex, about which Dwight Eisenhower of all people warned in his valedictory speech, became a central feature of U.S. society. This complex encompasses not merely the military and armaments manufacturers, but also the security and intelligence communities, and all those in politics, media, think tanks, academia, and so on, who make a living out of war and the fear of it. The military-industrial complex complements imperialism in informing and driving U.S. foreign policy, and much of U.S. society.

Adding fuel to the fire are the impending annual ROK-U.S. joint military exercises planned for August 16th, a frequent flashpoint with the North. South Korea's Unification Ministry has advised delaying the exercises in order to avoid dampening renewed inter-Korean engagement, while the Defence Ministry has announced that a decision will be made after considering COVID – 19 risks, the planned transfer of wartime operational control, and the need to "support diplomatic efforts for establishing peace on the Korean peninsula". While the US and South Korea nominally share responsibility for the joint military exercises, actual decision-making authority for this issue—as with anything within

the realm of South Korean military or foreign affairs—rests with the United States, which has thus far rejected the notion of a delay.

For their part, US conservative commentators have roundly condemned the notion of suspending the military exercises as a sign of submission to the North's "bullying tactics", in spite of the fact that the North has strictly abided by the inter-Korean military agreement signed in September 2019, and has not carried out a nuclear or intercontinental ballistic missile test since the failure of the Hanoi Summit that same year. US conservatives also claim that the drills are necessary to maintain readiness in the event of a North Korean attack, glossing over the indisputable overwhelming practical military capability fielded by the US, which undermines the veracity of any such claim.

There are in fact a number of practical reasons for the US to suspend or at least delay the ROK-U.S. joint military exercises at this juncture, not the least of which include the elevated risk of Covid-19 infection. Forcing thousands of military personnel into protracted close proximity with one another during a resurgence of the pandemic is patently unwise. Just last week, in response to a record number of infections among its members, U.S. Forces Korea (USFK) implemented tougher antivirus rules, banning visits to bars and clubs and mandating the use of masks.

Moreover, the drills violate both the 2018 Panmunjom Declaration and the 2018 North Korea – United States Singapore Declaration, both of which Biden has expressed support for. The 2018 2018 Panmunjom Declaration states in part that: "The two sides agreed to completely cease all hostile acts against each other in every domain including land, sea and air that are the root cause of military tension and conflicts."

Indeed, as 76 South Korean lawmakers pointed out last week, the annual joint military exercises "function as an obstacle to North Korea's relations with South Korea and the US," and should be suspended given the recent warming in inter-Korean relations in order to "bring North Korea to the table for dialogue." As former USFK commander General Vincent Brooks noted, these drills are "not just a show like the parades in Pyongyang" but rather provocative shows of force with the potential to trigger open war on the Korean Peninsula. Suspending them at this crucial juncture would be a concrete step toward continuing the hard-won diplomatic momentum with North Korea, and in the words of South Korean National Intelligence Agency Director Park Ji-won would constitute a "flexible response toward the big picture of continuing the peace momentum and denuclearization."

Call for action "[Stop US Korea Military Exercises](#)" CounterPunch 12.08.2021