

South Korea's New President Playing Dangerous Game with Pyongyang

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The resumption of full-scale joint military exercises between the US and South Korea will increase tensions on the Korean Peninsula. After South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol came to power on March 22, pressure on North Korea increased, and in reaction, Pyongyang may react harshly to the strengthening of military ties between Seoul and Washington.

The resumption of large-scale joint exercises between South Korea and the US, including joint training in the field, is one of Seoul's defence priorities. South Korean Defence Minister Lee Jong-sup made the statement while speaking at a regular news conference on July 22, Yonhap news agency reported. He also said the country will urgently push for the US's high-altitude missile defence system to be deployed in the country to counter threats emanating from North Korea.

South Korea has publicly announced the details of the resumption of full-scale joint military exercises, which were cancelled in 2018. The first such exercise will take place from August 22 to September 1. The exercise will combine computer simulation training, field drills, and civilian response drills. There will be a total of 11 joint field exercises, including at the brigade and regiment levels.

In fact, that equates to the resumption of the Ulchi-Freedom Guardian (UFG) exercise. UFG was cancelled in 2018 under the administration of President Moon Jae-in due to Seoul's interest in facilitating diplomacy with North Korea. Pyongyang views the UFG drills as a war manoeuvre.

North Korea views the joint military exercises between South Korea and the US as a direct threat to national security and will therefore react negatively to their resumption. Since coming to power, President Yoon Suk-yeol has increased pressure on North Korea and prioritised the strengthening of his country's military relations with the US.

It is noted that senior South Korean military figures began using the term “enemy” when talking about North Korea. In recent years, the term has not been used in inter-Korean relations. Seemingly, it appears that Seoul is gearing up for a confrontation with Pyongyang instead of looking for common ground. With such premises, there is no chance to start a dialogue and to resolve the division of Korea that has persisted for more than 70 years.

The Seoul government has repeated that it will take further actions following the recent series of weapons tests, something that will only increase tensions. On July 22, the South Korean President warned that North Korea could not only test nuclear weapons, but also have the ability to “do it at any time it wants.”

It is no coincidence that this statement coincides with the announcement of South Korea’s defence plans. Clearly, Seoul is working closely with the US to incite increased military confrontation on the Korean Peninsula to justify the need to hold regular large-scale military exercises.

This comes as North Korea condemned on July 23 remarks made by US deputy national security advisor for cyber and emerging technology, Anne Neuberger, about Pyongyang’s cyberattack capabilities. North Korea said it would continue to stand against what it called US aggression towards it. A North Korean Foreign Ministry spokesperson said that Neuberger’s branding of the country’s leadership as a “group of criminals” revealed the true nature of Washington’s hostile policy.

Neuberger claimed that the North Koreans were a criminal syndicate pursuing revenue “in the guise of a country”, alleging that thousands of trained hackers are stealing cryptocurrencies to fund the sanctions-hit state.

“After all, the US administration has revealed the true picture of its most vile hostile policy, once covered under the veil of ‘dialogue with no strings attached’ and ‘diplomatic engagement’,” state news agency KCNA said, citing the foreign ministry spokesperson. “In a similar fashion, the DPRK will face off the US, the world’s one and only group of criminals.”

It also comes as the FBI and Justice Department announced on July 19 that it disrupted the activities of a hacking group that was sponsored by the North Korean government and was targeting US hospitals with ransomware.

In this way, North Korea has demonstrated that it is making retaliatory actions against the US. If North Korea is willing to make retaliatory actions against the US, despite it being the world’s current greatest technological and military power, South Korea is playing a dangerous game by escalating provocations, all because its emboldened new president wants his country to have an elevated position as a Major non-NATO ally.

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