



Dangerous Crossroads: US « Rehearsal » of Invasion of North Korea. Largest Ever US-ROK Military Exercise

Pentagon Leads Over 300,000 Troops in a Rehearsal for an Invasion One Week after the White House Announces It's Considering Military Action against North Korea

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The United States and South Korea are conducting their largest-ever military exercises on the Korean peninsula [1], one week after the White House announced that it was considering military action against North Korea to bring about regime change. [2] The US-led exercises involve:

- 300,000 South Korea troops
- 17,000 US troops
- The supercarrier USS Carl Vinson (image below)
- US F-35B and F-22 stealth fighters
- US B-18 and B-52 bombers
- South Korean F-15s and KF-16s jetfighters. [3]

While the United States labels the drills as “purely defensive” [4] the nomenclature is misleading. The exercises are not defensive in the sense of practicing to repel a possible North Korean invasion and to push North Korean forces back across the 38th parallel in the event of a North Korean attack, but envisage an invasion of North Korea in order to incapacitate its nuclear weapons, destroy its military command, and assassinate its leader.



The exercises can only be construed as “defensive” if undertaken as preparation for a response to an actual North Korean first-strike, or as a rehearsed pre-emptive response to an anticipated first strike. In either event, the exercises are invasion-related, and Pyongyang’s complaint that US and South Korean forces are practicing an invasion is valid.

But the likelihood of a North Korean attack on South Korea is vanishingly small. Pyongyang is outspent militarily by Seoul by a factor of almost 4:1, [5] and South Korean forces can rely on more advanced weapons systems than can North Korea. Additionally, the South Korean military is not only backed up by, but is under the command of, the unprecedentedly powerful US military.

A North Korean attack on South Korea would be suicidal, and therefore we can regard its possibility as virtually non-existent, especially in light of US nuclear doctrine which allows the use of nuclear weapons against North Korea. Indeed, US leaders have reminded North Korean leaders on numerous occasions that their country could be turned into “a charcoal briquette.” [6] That anyone of consequence in the US state truly believes that South Korea is under threat of an attack by the North is risible.

The exercises are being carried out within the framework of Operation Plan 5015 which “aims to remove the North’s weapons of mass destruction and prepare ... for a pre-emptive strike in the event of an imminent North Korean attack, as well a ‘decapitation’ raids targeting the leadership.” [7]

In connection with decapitation raids, the exercises involve “US Special Missions Units responsible for the killing of Osama bin Laden in 2011, including SEAL Team Six.” [8] According to one newspaper report, the “participation of special forces in the drills...may be an indication the two sides are rehearsing the assassination of Kim Jong Un.” [9]

A US official told South Korea’s Yonhap news agency that “A bigger number of and more diverse US special operation forces will take part in this year’s ... exercises to practice

missions to infiltrate the North, remove the North's war command and demolish its key military facilities." [10]

Astonishingly, despite participating in the highly provocative exercises—which can have no other consequence than to rattle the North Koreans and place them under imminent threat—the South Korean ministry of national defense announced that “South Korea and the US were keenly monitoring the movements of North Korean soldiers in preparation for possible provocations.” [11]

The notion that Washington and Seoul must be on the alert for North Korean ‘provocations’, at a time the Pentagon and its South Korean ally are rehearsing an invasion and ‘decapitation’ strike against North Korea, represents what East Asia specialist Tim Beal calls a “special sort of unreality.” [12] Adding to the unreality is the fact that the rehearsal for an invasion comes on the heels of the White House announcing *urbi et orbi* that it is considering military action against North Korea to bring about regime change.

In 2015, the North Koreans proposed to suspend their nuclear weapons program in exchange for the United States suspending its military exercises on the peninsula. The US State Department peremptorily dismissed the offer, saying it inappropriately linked the United States’ “routine” military drills to what Washington demanded of Pyongyang, namely, denuclearization. [13] Instead, Washington “insisted the North give up its nuclear weapons program first before any negotiations” could take place. [14]

In 2016, the North Koreans made the same proposal. Then US president Barack Obama replied that Pyongyang would “have to do better than that.” [15]

At the same time, the high-profile Wall Street-directed Council on Foreign Relations released a task force report which advised Washington against striking a peace deal with North Korea on the grounds that Pyongyang would expect US troops to withdraw from the peninsula. Were the United States to quit the peninsula militarily, its strategic position relative to China and Russia, namely, its ability to threaten its two near-peer competitors, would be weakened, the report warned. Accordingly, Washington was adjured to refrain from promising Beijing that any help it provided in connection with North Korea would be rewarded by a reduction in the US troop presence on the peninsula. [16]

Earlier this month, China resurrected Pyongyang's perennial proposal. “To defuse the looming crisis on the peninsula, China [proposed] that, as a first step, [North Korea] suspend its missile and nuclear activities in exchange for a halt in the large scale US - [South Korea] exercises. This suspension-for-suspension,” the Chinese argued, “can help us break out of the security dilemma and bring the parties back to the negotiating table.” [17]

Washington rejected the proposal immediately. So too did Japan. The Japanese ambassador to the UN reminded the world that the US goal is “not a freeze-for-freeze but to denuclearize North Korea.” [18] Implicit in this reminder was the addendum that the United States would take no steps to denuclearize its own approach to dealing with North Korea (Washington dangles a nuclear sword of Damocles over Pyongyang) and would continue to carry out annual rehearsals for an invasion.

Refusal to negotiate, or to demand that the other side immediately grant what is being demanded as a precondition for talks, (give me what I want, then I'll talk), is consistent with the approach to North Korea adopted by Washington as early as 2003. Urged by Pyongyang

to negotiate a peace treaty, then US Secretary of State Colin Powell demurred. “We don’t do non-aggression pacts or treaties, things of that nature,” Powell explained. [19]

As part of the special unreality constructed by the United States, Russia, or more specifically its president, Vladimir Putin, is routinely accused by Washington of committing “aggressions,” which are said to include military exercises along the Russian border with Ukraine. These exercises, hardly on the immense scale of the US-South Korean exercises, are labelled “highly provocative” [20] by US officials, while the Pentagon-led rehearsal for an invasion of North Korea is described as routine and “defensive in nature.”

But imagine that Moscow had mobilized 300,000 Russian troops along the Ukraine border, under an operational plan to invade Ukraine, neutralize its military assets, destroy its military command, and assassinate its president, one week after the Kremlin declared that it was considering military action in Ukraine to bring about regime change. Who, except someone mired in a special sort of unreality, would construe this as “purely defensive in nature”?

Notes

1. “THAAD, ‘decapitation’ raid add to allies’ new drills,” The Korea Herald, March 13, 2017; Elizabeth Shim, “U.S., South Korean drills include bin Laden assassination team,” UPI, March 13, 2017.

2. Jonathan Cheng and Alastair Gale, “North Korea missile test stirs ICBM fears,” The Wall Street Journal, March 7, 2017.

3. “S. Korea, US begins largest-ever joint military drills,” KBS World, March 5, 2017; Jun Ji-hye, “Drills to strike N. Korea taking place,” Korea Times, March 13, 2017.

4. Jun Ji-hye, “Drills to strike N. Korea taking place,” Korea Times, March 13, 2017.

5. Alastair Gale and Chieko Tsuneoka, “Japan to increase military spending for fifth year in a row,” The Wall Street Journal, December 21, 2016.

6. Bruce Cumings, “Latest North Korean provocations stem from missed US opportunities for demilitarization,” Democracy Now!, May 29, 2009.

7. “THAAD, ‘decapitation’ raid add to allies’ new drills,” The Korea Herald, March 13, 2017.

8. “U.S., South Korean drills include bin Laden assassination team,” UPI, March 13, 2017.

9. Ibid.

10. “U.S. Navy SEALs to take part in joint drills in S. Korea,” Yonhap, March 13, 2017.

11. Jun Ji-hye, “Drills to strike N. Korea taking place,” Korea Times, March 13, 2017.

12. Tim Beal, “Looking in the right direction: Establishing a framework for analyzing the situation on the Korean peninsula (and much more besides),” Korean Policy Institute, April 23, 2016.

13. Choe Sang-hun, “North Korea offers U.S. deal to halt nuclear test,” The New York Times, January 10, 2015.

14. Eric Talmadge, “Obama dismisses NKorea proposal on halting nuke tests,” Associated Press,

April 24, 2016.

15. Ibid.

16. "A Sharper Choice on North Korea: Engaging China for a Stable Northeast Asia," Independent Task Force Report No. 74, Council on Foreign Relations, 2016.

17. "China limited in its self-appointed role as mediator for Korean peninsula affairs," The Hankyoreh, March 9, 2017.

18. Farnaz Fassihi, Jeremy Page and Chun Han Wong, "U.N. Security Council decries North Korea missile test," The Wall Street Journal, March 8, 2017.

19. "Beijing to host North Korea talks," The New York Times, August 14, 2003.

20. Stephen Fidler, "NATO struggles to muster 'spearhead' force to counter Russia," The Wall Street Journal, December 1, 2014.

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