

US, Japan, and South Korea to conduct major war games

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The US, Japan, and South Korea are planning to hold a major new trilateral military exercise, dubbed Freedom Edge, as early as this month, military sources in Seoul revealed on Friday. The drills were initially announced during the recent Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore and represent the increased push by the three allies to formalize their de facto military alliance targeting China, as well as Russia.

Freedom Edge, will likely cover land, sea, air, and cyber domains. The US nuclear-powered aircraft carrier USS Theodore Roosevelt will likely participate in the first iteration of the drills, though the exact dates have yet to be confirmed. US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin declared at Shangri-La that Freedom Edge would “allow our countries to train together in unprecedented ways.”

During last August’s Camp David summit, US President Joe Biden, Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida, and South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol agreed to hold new trilateral exercises, ostensibly aimed at deterring the North Korean “threat.”

In reality, these drills are part of a growing system of Indo-Pacific alliances led by the US to encircle and threaten China. Defense Secretary Austin stated at Shangri-La on June 1: “Today, we are witnessing a new convergence around nearly all aspects of security in the Indo-Pacific. And this new convergence is producing a stronger, more resilient, and more capable network of partnerships. And that is defining a new era of security in the Indo-Pacific.”

The following day, Austin was joined by Japanese Defense Minister Minoru Kihara and South Korean Defense Minister Sin Won-sik to announce Freedom Edge in line with the three governments’ agreement at Camp David. The exercise takes its name from the US bilateral war games Keen Edge and Freedom Shield

with Japan and South Korea respectively.

On June 5, in a preview of the weaponry Washington and its allies are prepared to unleash, the US dispatched a B-1B bomber to the Korean Peninsula to conduct bombing drills, the first by such an aircraft since 2017. The B-1B carries the heaviest conventional payload of any US bomber. It was joined by two South Korean F-15K fighter jets. The B-1B also conducted additional air drills with US and South Korean military aircraft.

There is no doubt that the new and old drills are directed above all at China. During this year’s Keen Edge in February, Grant Nesham, a retired US Marine colonel and senior researcher at the Japan Forum for Strategic Studies, stated that the exercise was “almost by definition directed at China” and “has been for at least a decade.” In addition, Freedom Shield is one of two massive war games that takes place annually between the US and South Korea, involving tens of thousands of troops directly on Beijing’s doorstep.

Furthermore, the revelation that Freedom Edge could take place this month coincides with Russian President Vladimir Putin’s reported upcoming visit to North Korea, a sign of increasing cooperation between the two. North Korea has been accused of helping arm Russia even as the US has relied on South Korea and Japan, in flagrant violation of the latter’s constitution, to arm Ukraine. The US-Japan-South Korea war games therefore take on an increasingly direct challenge to Russia as well.

This US-led war planning and the military exercises are bound up with Washington and NATO’s acceleration of the war against Russia in Ukraine as well as their support for the Israeli genocide in Gaza. These threaten to bring China directly into what is an expanding global conflict, particularly as Washington has directly challenged the One China policy over

Taiwan, attempting to goad Beijing into war, much as it did with Russia in Ukraine.

The US has also focused on formalizing the trilateral military cooperation between Japan and South Korea, with Austin, Kihara, and Sin also agreeing to deepen military cooperation in other fields while in Singapore. The three announced a new framework that would be developed within the year. This will include senior-level policy consultations, information sharing, military exchanges, and more trilateral drills, such as tabletop exercises.

The US has long pushed for cooperation between Tokyo and Seoul, having built a ballistic missile system throughout the region that targets China. This requires increased military and intelligence sharing between Japan and South Korea, which has been hampered in the past by unresolved historical issues stemming from Japan's colonization of Korea (1910–1945) and economic tensions between the two.

Speaking anonymously to the *Japan Times*, a former US-Japan alliance manager—an official responsible for coordinating between the two—stated that the allies are now seeking to capitalize on the current relations between the three as the opportunity “does not come along often.” In other words, the three countries are moving quickly to solidify this alliance behind the backs of their people, so as not to fuel anti-war sentiment.

These arrangements could include Japan's cooperation in carrying out nuclear attacks. Washington and Seoul last year launched the bilateral Nuclear Consultative Group to give the latter more say in how US nuclear weapons would be used. Seoul is reportedly “open” to the idea of Japan participating in the group, Kim Seong-han, President Yoon's national security advisor from 2022?2023, stated in February.

The US is claiming all this is a push for peace. At Shangri-La, Austin declared that the new alliances in the region were motivated by “respect for sovereignty and international law. The free flow of commerce and ideas. Freedom of the seas and skies. And openness, transparency, and accountability.” Washington has regularly used these claims to above all challenge the One China policy over Taiwan and upend the status quo in the region while demonizing Beijing.

The One China policy states that Taiwan is a part of China, which has its roots in Washington's claim that

the Kuomintang (KMT) government in Taipei was the legitimate government of all China following the Chinese Revolution in 1949. The US defended the KMT at the time by sending its 7th fleet into the Taiwan Strait. Only in 1979, for tactical considerations focused on the Soviet Union, did Washington formally recognize Beijing and withdraw diplomatic relations with Taipei. Since then, the US has de facto recognized the One China policy and Beijing as the legitimate government of all China, including Taiwan.

Now, as US and Japanese imperialism seek to subjugate and ultimately carve up China, reducing it to a semi-colonial status, the two have all but renounced the One China policy to further their aims, bringing the region closer to war.



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