

Heightened Tensions: North Korea's Stern Warning over US-South Korean Drills

written by Ezba Walayat | April 14, 2023



Introduction

On 6th April, 2023, North Korea asserted that joint military exercises by the United States and South Korea have heightened the tensions and brought the Korean Peninsula to the brink of a nuclear war. Additionally, as President Joe Biden's special envoy for North Korea travelled to Seoul for discussions with allies over the North Korea's escalating nuclear threat, Pyongyang warned to take "offensive action" in response to the expansion of United States military drills with South Korea. The Korean Central News Agency (KCNA), state media outlet, denounced the ongoing drills as a source for pushing the situation on the Korean peninsula to the point of explosion.

Background

Last month, South Korea and the United States have conducted their largest joint military exercises (Freedom Shield) in five years, despite Pyongyang's warning that such actions can be regarded as a declaration of war. In response to mounting threats from North Korea, which has recently conducted a number of missile tests in last few months, Washington and Seoul have increased defensive cooperation. The annual springtime exercises featuring United States nuclear-powered aircraft carrier, B-1B and B-52 bombers, as well as the two countries first significant amphibious landing drills, have been carried out by the United States and South Korean military. The North Korean leader Kim Jong Un's sister issued a warning the day after a B-52 bomber flew over the peninsula on 6th March 2023. She said her nation was prepared to take "quick and overwhelming action" against the United States and South Korea.

But, on April 5th, 2023, for the first time in a month on the peninsula, B52s were also deployed. In

response to concerns that North Korea would conduct a nuclear test, the United States sent nuclear-capable B-52 bombers to the Korean Peninsula as a show of force. The Defense Ministry of South Korea confirmed that long-range bombers participated in collaborative aerial exercises. According to Lt. Gen. Park Ha Sik, the commander of the South Korean air force operation command, the drills “show the strong resolve of the South Korea-U.S. alliance and its perfect readiness to respond to any provocation by North Korea swiftly and overwhelmingly.”



Joint Submarine Drill by the U.S., South-Korea and Japan

On April 3, 2023, the navies of the three countries i.e. South Korea, the United States and Japan started their first anti-submarine drill in six months in order to improve their coordination against the growing North Korean missile threats. The nuclear-powered USS Nimitz aircraft carrier and naval destroyers from South Korea, the U.S., and Japan participated in maritime drills in international waters off the southern island of Jeju, according to a statement from the South Korean Defense Ministry. The two-day exercises coincide with fears that North Korea may perform its first nuclear test since 2017 following the country’s recent display of smaller nuclear warheads.

Military Activities of North Korea

As a response to U.S.-South Korea joint military drills, Pyongyang has decided to increase production of more weapons-grade nuclear material for the expansion of country’s arsenal. On March 28, 2023, KCNA published images of the warheads, known as Hwasan-31s, as leader Kim Jong Un visited the Nuclear Weapons Institute. In addition to increasing its military action in recent weeks, North-Korea conducted a

record number of nuclear tests last year. It has not only launched cruise missiles from a submarine but also tested an underwater drone with nuclear weapons capability and displayed new smaller nuclear warheads. It has also launched the Hwasong 17, its longest-range intercontinental ballistic missile. The Hwasong-17, is also called as the “monster missile” of North Korea. State media in North Korea confirmed the ICBM launch and stated that it was done in a response to the “provocative and aggressive” military drills in order to show a tough response posture. It was the one of the major weapons tests that have taken place around Freedom Shield, the massive joint military exercises between the United States and South Korea, which was considered as an invasion drill by Pyongyang. Despite claims to the contrary, the United States and South Korea have emphasized that their drills are defensive in nature.