

Provocative War Games in Sea of Japan and Yellow Sea: US, S.Korea to Hold Joint Military Exercises

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SEOUL — The United States said Thursday it will likely hold joint exercises with South Korea in the Yellow Sea in the near future, raising tensions with North Korea ahead of key military talks with Pyongyang.

North Korea's military is scheduled to hold the talks Thursday with the United Nations Command, the first since the sinking of a South Korean warship, after postponing the meeting from Tuesday for "administrative reasons."

The talks are scheduled to be held at 10:00 am (0100 GMT) at the border village of Panmunjom, according to a statement Wednesday from the UN Command, which monitors the Korean War armistice.

Only hours before the meeting is due to start, the Pentagon said that the US intended to hold joint military exercises with South Korea, a move likely to anger North Korea and despite objections from China, the North's main ally.

Pentagon spokesman Geoff Morrell said Defense Secretary Robert Gates and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton will meet their counterparts in Seoul on July 21 to "discuss and likely approve a proposed series of USD/ROK combined military exercises."

These exercise will include "new naval and air exercises in both the Sea of Japan and the Yellow Sea," Morrell said.

The war games will involve a wide range of assets and are expected to be initiated in the near future," he said.

The announcement comes after China warned against the joint exercises near its waters, and urged the two allies to not add to tensions with North Korea.

Morrell, however, dismissed China's criticism, insisting the drills are "a matter of our ability to exercise in the open seas, in international waters. Those determinations are made by us, and us alone."

The exercises would be defensive in nature but "will send a clear message of deterrence to North Korea," Morrell said.

"Where we exercise, when we exercise, with whom and how, using what assets and so forth, are determinations that are made by the United States Navy, by the Department of

Defense, by the United States government,” Morrell added.

Earlier this month South Korea confirmed it would stage a naval exercise with the United States in the Yellow Sea, to deter North Korean’s “illegal provocation,” with defense ministry spokesman Won Tae-Jae again slamming the sinking of the South Korean warship, the Cheonan.

The South, backed up by the findings of a multinational investigation, accuses the North of torpedoing the Cheonan in March with the loss of 46 lives. Pyongyang denies the charge.

The North previously refused to hold discussions with the US-led UN Command over the sinking of the Cheonan, calling for talks only with South Korea, but it shifted its stance last Friday.

Thursday’s talks, between colonels, are intended to make arrangements for a later meeting at general-level.

After the North agreed last week to the talks, the UN Security Council issued a statement which condemned the attack but did not apportion blame — a result hailed by the North as a “great diplomatic victory”.

The statement was watered down under pressure from Pyongyang’s ally China.

In the wake of the UN statement, the North also reiterated its conditional willingness to return to stalled six-party nuclear disarmament negotiations.

But it also threatened “strong physical retaliation” if South Korea and the United States persist in “demonstration of forces and sanctions”.

Some analysts believe the North’s navy sank the corvette in revenge for damage it suffered in a firefight last November near the disputed sea border.

Analysts at a Seoul seminar did not specify who was to blame for the sinking, but said the North may also become more belligerent as it prepares for a power transfer from leader Kim Jong-Il to his youngest son Jong-Un.

David Kang, professor at the University of Southern California, said the new leadership could mean a “more belligerent North Korea that is less willing to negotiate with the outside”.

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