

# World News

## As N. Korea Vows Response, U.S. Dismisses Calls to Pause Drills

By Associated Press

OSAN AIR BASE, South Korea — As North Korea vowed “merciless retaliation” against U.S.-South Korean military drills that it claims are an invasion rehearsal, senior U.S. military commanders dismissed calls to pause or downsize exercises they called crucial to countering a clear threat from Pyongyang.

The heated North Korean rhetoric, along with occasional weapons tests, is standard fare during the spring and summer war games by allies Seoul and Washington, but always uneasy ties between the Koreans are worse than normal this year following weeks of tit-for-tat threats between President Donald Trump and Pyongyang in the wake of the North’s two intercontinental ballistic missile tests last month.

Korea, said the allies should continue the war games until they “have reason not to.” North Korea’s military said in a statement that it would launch an unspecified “merciless retaliation and unsparing punishment” on the United States over the Ulchi Freedom Guardian drills that began last month for an 11-day run. Despite the threat, an unprompted direct attack is extremely unlikely because the United States vastly outguns Pyongyang, which values the continuation of its dictatorship above all else. Impoverished North Korea hates the annual drills in part because they force it to respond with expensive military measures of its own. The North Korean statement accused the United States of deploying unspecified “lethal” weapons for the drills that it says involve a “beheading operation” training aimed at removing absolute ruler Kim Jong Un.



United States Forces Korea Commander Gen. Vincent Brooks at Osan Air Base in Pyeongtaek, South Korea

There have been calls in both the United States and South Korea to postpone or modify the drills in an attempt to ease hostility on the Korean Peninsula following North Korea’s threat to lob missiles toward the U.S. territory of Guam. But a visiting group of senior U.S. military commanders, including Adm. Harry Harris, the commander of U.S. forces in the Pacific, said the drills are critical for the allies to maintain readiness against an aggressive North Korea.

“A strong diplomatic effort backed by a strong military effort is key because credible combat power should be in support of diplomacy and not the other way around,” Harris said during a news conference at the Osan Air Base in South Korea.

Vincent Brooks, commander of U.S. Forces

Japanese Foreign Minister Taro Kono offered a different view, saying pressure, not talks, is needed to push North Korea to give up its nuclear weapons. He said Pyongyang had used dialogue in the past to buy time.

The Ulchi drills are largely computer-simulated war games held every summer, and this year’s exercise involves 17,500 American troops and 50,000 South Korean soldiers. No field training like live-fire exercises or tank maneuvering is involved in the drills, in which alliance officers sit at computers to practice how they would engage in battles and hone their decision-making capabilities. The allies have said the drills are defensive in nature.

## What Iraq’s Kurdish Peshmerga Believe How It Will Affect the Country’s Post-ISIS Future

With the liberation of Mosul in July, Iraq again finds itself at a crossroads. The Islamic State (or ISIS) has lost its crown jewel, the seat from which it declared its so-called caliphate in 2014. For that, the credit goes to Iraqi government forces, the militias that make up the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), and the Kurdish peshmerga. A side effect of the peshmerga victories in the war against ISIS, however, has been an increase in the territory held by the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) by around 40 percent since 2014. And, in turn, the Kurds have been further empowered to challenge the territorial integrity of Iraq.

Legally, the KRG continues to operate as a federal unit of the Iraqi national government, but a September 25 referendum for independence could set the Kurds on a trajectory toward sovereignty, something Iraqi Kurds overwhelmingly wanted in an unofficial referendum held in 2005. Both the upcoming referendum and issues of territorial control are already being hotly contested. Peshmerga views of the post-ISIS regional order and the extent to which these views are unified are therefore key to Iraq’s political future.

Experts often question the degree to which the Kurds of Iraq and their various peshmerga groups are united politically. The Kurdistan Region is split between the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). These parties fought a civil war against one another in the mid-1990s and have since maintained separate military and security forces. Complicating things further, the KDP and PUK have since fractionalized,

most dramatically with the emergence of the Gorran (change) movement in 2009, which claims to disavow the entrenched and corrupt politics of the two traditional parties.

Peshmerga beliefs about the Sunni Arabs who made up the bulk of ISIS members and supporters will be central to the prospects for reconciliation. Despite reporting that ISIS membership is driven more by revenge than economic grievances, peshmerga are willing to believe that civilian support for ISIS was conditional. Sixty-five percent of peshmerga sampled believe that over 75 percent of Sunni Arabs in Iraq supported ISIS in 2014, but only nine percent of peshmerga believe that ISIS enjoys support from over 75 percent of Sunni Arabs today.

Kurdish military forces are more united than has been previously suggested, which could bring a modicum of stability to post-ISIS Iraq and the Kurdistan region in particular. Nonetheless, a united and well-integrated Kurdish military is no panacea for the disputed territories. Lasting peace will hinge on the implementation of a systematic and transparent process of transitional justice for ISIS supporters, lest the cycle of violence be fueled. Nearly 50 percent of peshmerga we surveyed refused to believe allegations that peshmerga members beat Sunni Arab civilians that collaborated with ISIS, whereas only 5 percent refused to believe the same allegations made about the PMF. Getting the peshmerga and the PMF on the same page about how to treat ISIS supporters will be a critical first step to stabilizing the regional order

## Two North Korean Shipments to Syrian Chemical Weapons Program Intercepted

Confidential UN Report Investigating North Korea Sanctions Violations Reveals Two Shipments From DPRK to Syrian Government Agency Responsible for Chemical Weapons Program Intercepted in Past Six Months.



Two North Korean shipments to a Syrian government agency responsible for the country’s chemical weapons program were intercepted in the past six months, according to a confidential United Nations report on North Korea sanctions violations.

The report by a panel of independent UN experts, which was submitted to the UN Security Council earlier last month, gave no details on when or where the interdictions occurred or what the shipments contained.

“The panel is investigating reported prohibited chemical, ballistic missile and conventional arms cooperation between Syria and the DPRK (North Korea),” the experts wrote in the 37-page report.

“Two member states interdicted shipments destined for Syria. Another Member state informed the panel that it had reasons to believe that the goods were part of a KOMID contract with Syria,” according to the report.

KOMID is the Korea Mining Development Trading Corporation. It was blacklisted by the Security Council in 2009 and described as Pyongyang’s key arms dealer and exporter of equipment related to ballistic missiles and conventional weapons. In March 2016 the council also blacklisted two KOMID representatives in Syria.

SSRC has overseen the country’s chemical weapons program since the 1970s.

The UN experts said activities between Syria and North Korea they were investigating included cooperation on Syrian missile programs and maintenance and repair of Syrian surface-to-air missiles air defense systems.

The experts said they were also investigating the use of the VX nerve agent in Malaysia to kill the estranged half-brother of North Korea’s leader Kim Jong Un in February.

North Korea has been under UN sanctions since 2006 over its ballistic missile and nuclear programs and the Security Council has ratcheted up the measures in response to five nuclear weapons tests and four long-range missile launches.

Syria agreed to destroy its chemical weapons in 2013 under a deal brokered by Russia and the United States. However, diplomats and weapons inspectors suspect Syria may have secretly maintained or developed a new chemical weapons capability.

During the country’s more than six-year long civil war the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons has said the banned nerve agent sarin has been used at least twice, while the use of chlorine as a weapon has been widespread. The Syrian government has repeatedly denied using chemical weapons.

## Erdogan Vows to Prevent Kurdish ‘terror corridor’ in Syria

ANKARA - President Recep Tayyip Erdogan vowed Turkey would thwart any attempt by a Kurdish militia it deems “terrorists” to carve out a Kurdish state in northern Syria.

Ankara views the Kurdish Peoples’ Protection Units (YPG) and the Kurdish Democratic Party (PYD) as a terror group. But the United States is closely allied with the groups’ fighters in the battle against jihadists in Syria.

“We do not and will never allow a so-called state to be established by the PYD, YPG in northern Syria,” Erdogan said in a speech in Ankara.

“They want to establish a terror corridor in northern Syria reaching the Mediterranean,” the president said.

The Syrian Kurdish groups have two “cantons” in Syria’s northeast as well as the Afrin region to the west.

Erdogan added that Turkey would continue to fight against terror organisations “wherever we find them”, referring to the YPG which Turkey says is the Syrian affiliate of the outlawed Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) which it has waged an insurgency against the Turkish state since 1984 during which over 40,000 people have been killed.

In August last year, Turkey launched a cross-border operation in northern Syria, aimed at clearing the border zone of both YPG fighters and jihadists.

There has been speculation Ankara may



be planning to extend an operation against the YPG to clear it from the town of Afrin, where Erdogan has said its presence is a “threat” for Turkey.

Erdogan said a joint operation with Iran against Kurdish militants which “pose a threat,” including the PKK, is “always on the agenda.”

Iranian security forces have also fought the PKK’s affiliate, the Party of Free Life of Kurdistan (PJAK). Both groups have rear bases in neighbouring Iraq.

Ankara has repeatedly warned against holding the non-binding September 25 poll.

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