

# South Korea backs Washington's war in Syria and Iraq

By Ben McGrath  
25 September 2014

In its drive to war in Iraq and now Syria, the US has sought support from a wide range of allies and partners in order to legitimize its criminal intervention in the Middle East. Earlier this month, President Park Geun-hye's government shamelessly gave its support to Washington for its bogus new "war on terror" against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

During a September 11 press conference, foreign ministry spokesman No Gwang-il stated: "South Korea voices its support to the efforts by the international community to defeat the Islamic State militant group." Seoul also pledged a preliminary \$1.2 million in "humanitarian aid" for refugees fleeing from ISIS.

National Security Office (NSO) chief Kim Kwan-jin met with US National Security Advisor Susan Rice on September 15, followed by a meeting with Deputy Secretary of State William Burns the next day, to discuss the US war and further support from South Korea.

Following the meetings, a diplomatic source told *Hankyoreh*: "As long as the US is only carrying out air strikes, there wouldn't be any kind of military assistance for the South Korean government to provide." But South Korean officials left open the possibility of military aid in the future.

The same day as Kim's meeting with Burns, a White House press release stated that they "agreed on the need to counter new and emerging challenges to global security and stability, such as the threat the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant poses to Iraq, Syria and the region" and "pledged to continue close consultations on these and a range of regional and global security issues."

The question is not whether South Korea will commit more to the US war, but what form this will take. A senior government official earlier stated: "We have no

choice but to work closely with the US because of our alliance with them. We will carefully review our options during Kim Kwan-jin's visit to the US, our foreign minister's visit to the UN and his meeting with US Secretary of State John Kerry, and the two plus two conference between the US and South Korean foreign ministers and defense ministers."

The UN General Assembly meeting this week will undoubtedly be the scene of significant arm twisting by the United States to secure assistance from its allies, including South Korea, in waging war. Speaking yesterday, President Park signaled her support for the US anti-terror campaign, declaring that the UN "must meet head on the challenge of violent extremism and foreign fighters who spread it."

Seoul's participation in the war would provide it with an opportunity to strengthen ties with the US. "Korea could win trust from its long-time ally, the US, while not provoking ISIS by remaining cautious on military support for the Washington-led fight," Yeo Yeong-mu, the director of the South-North Strategy Institute, suggested.

Since taking office in February 2013, President Park has sought closer ties with China, the main target of the US "pivot to Asia," thus raising concerns in Washington. The "pivot" is a comprehensive US strategy aimed at undermining Chinese influence throughout the Indo-Pacific and encircling China militarily.

In an interview with the *JoongAng Daily* last month, Jim DeMint of the right-wing US think tank, the Heritage Foundation, stated: "We hope for a positive China-Korea relationship as the result of Korean leadership, rather than China's coercion." His real concern was not "China's coercion", but the need for Washington to pull South Korea into line.

South Korea, which depends on US military backing, has backed every American war over the past 60 years. During the Vietnam War, more than 300,000 South Korean troops served in Vietnam and some 5,000 died. At the peak, about 50,000 soldiers were fighting as part of the US neo-colonial war.

Former South Korean President Roh Moo-hyun, a Democrat, who came to office on a wave of anti-American sentiment after two teenage girls were run over and killed by a US military vehicle, committed several thousand troops to the US occupation of Iraq.

Roh's administration initially sent 465 medics and engineers in May 2003, then dispatched 3,600 combat troops to the northern city of Irbil in September 2004. These troops were given the task of securing the country's northern oil fields in the Kurdish regions of the country.

The decision to dispatch troops was highly unpopular, with polls showing 60 percent of people opposed the war before the troop dispatch. Roh also sent 210 engineers and medics to Afghanistan to assist in the US occupation there.

Needless to say, Seoul's support for the new US-led war in the Middle East has been committed behind the backs of the South Korean people. Both major parties—the ruling Saenuri Party and the opposition New Politics Alliance for Democracy—support the US intervention in Iraq and Syria.

South Korea also backed Washington's war drive against Syria last year, based on fraudulent claims that the regime of President Bashar al-Assad used chemical weapons. Seoul attempted to draw a connection between Syria and North Korea, claiming that not attacking Syria would send the wrong message to Pyongyang over its nuclear weapons.

The US air strikes on Syria are the start of a protracted war whose prime target is not ISIS but the Assad regime and its main backers—Iran and Russia. It is a war that could rapidly expand and engulf the region. Washington will certainly insist that its junior ally, South Korea, provides more than humanitarian aid.