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## **SOUTH KOREA SEEKS SMALLER MILITARY DRILLS WITH US AMID NORTH KOREA TALKS**

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Channel News Asia (19 December 2018)

South Korea wants to hold smaller joint military drills with the United States next year, the defence ministry said on Thursday (Dec 20), scaling back larger exercises as part of an effort to boost nuclear diplomacy with North Korea.

The allies have suspended a number of combined military exercises this year as tensions on the Korean peninsula eased and Washington began talks to dismantle Pyongyang's nuclear programme.

The North has denounced the annual drills, which in the past involved hundreds of thousands of troops, warships and aircraft, as a "rehearsal for war."

With nuclear talks under way, Seoul and Washington are discussing scaling back their regular field exercises, including Foal Eagle in early 2019, and hold two computer-simulated command post drills next year, the defence ministry said.

US Defence Secretary Jim Mattis said last month the Foal Eagle exercise would be "reorganised a bit to keep it at a level that will not be harmful to diplomacy" with North Korea.

The defence ministry delivered its plan to President Moon Jae-in on Thursday as part of its annual policy briefing.

"Joint field exercises would take place all year round after adjusting the scale," the ministry said in a statement.

The plan is also expected to affect a major summer exercise known as Ulchi Freedom Guardian, which the allies suspended last year for the first time in 28 years.

In his opening remarks at the briefing, Moon said South Korea's strong defence had underpinned "a new chapter of history of peace on the Korean peninsula."

"But it's only provisional peace," he said. "We have to establish unwavering, lasting peace next year."

Relations improved this year between the Communist North and rich, democratic South, technically still at war because the 1950 to 1953 Korean War ended in a truce, not a peace treaty.

They have held three leaders' summits and signed a pact to establish a no-fly zone, remove landmines and guard posts near their heavily-guarded border.

North Korean leader Kim Jong Un also met US President Donald Trump in June at a historic summit in Singapore. They vowed to work towards denuclearisation, but both sides have made little progress since then.

Stephen Biegun, the US special representative for North Korea, said on Wednesday humanitarian aid to North Korea could be expedited in a move seen aimed at reviving the stalled nuclear talks.

The larger military drills could be revisited if there is no progress in the talks, said Shin Beom-chul, a senior fellow at the Asian Institute for Policy Studies in Seoul.

"If no progress is made by the summer, the United States would face substantial pressure at home and could try to restart the Ulchi Freedom Guardian exercise," he said.

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