Diplomatic Remedies for THAAD Madness: The US, China and the Two Koreas

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Diplomatic Remedies for THAAD Madness: The US, China and the Two Koreas

Mel Gurtov

Abstract: This commentary assesses the geopolitical implications for war and peace in Northeast Asia of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense antimissile system that the US seeks to install in South Korea at a time of deep tensions in Northeast Asia.

THAAD (Terminal High Altitude Area Defense, Lockheed Martin, “We’re engineering a better tomorrow”)

The US decision, supported by the South Korean government, to deploy an antimissile system known as THAAD (Terminal High Altitude Area Defense) may be one of the most thoughtless strategic moves in a generation. The official US justification is that close-in defense against North Korean missiles is necessary to protect South Korea. But the deployment is having more than a few negative repercussions: an argument in China for increasing its nuclear weapons stockpile; an incentive in North Korea for continuing to develop its long-range missile capability; a deep fissure in China-South Korea relations; a roiling of South Korean politics at a time when its corrupt president has been impeached; and a new source of tension in already fraught Sino-US relations.

Most of these negatives could have been anticipated when THAAD was initially on the drawing board several years ago. Yet they were thrust into the background on the argument that the North Korean missile threat to the continental US was so pressing as to warrant building a defense against it. Never mind that Kim Jong-un and his colleagues would have to contemplate that a missile attack on South Korea, Japan, or the United States would result in a counterattack and the immediate and utter destruction of North Korea’s military and political institutions. But US leaders in the last two administrations have preferred to press ahead with missile defense rather than (a) consider the possibility that North Korea’s nuclear weapon and missile buildup is intended to deter a US attack; (b) weigh a new diplomatic overture to the North that might reduce tensions and thus the need for THAAD; and (c) give North Korea further incentive to complete work on an ICBM. Lay the US decision at the door of the “military-industrial complex” if you will—Lockheed Martin is the manufacturer, and a single THAAD unit costs about $1.6 billion—but the fact remains that planning and deployment of THAAD is a decision where the risks and costs far outweigh any benefit.

And those (supposed) benefits are already shrinking. North Korea now has a formidable array of short- and intermediate-range ballistic missiles (IRBMs), and seems close to deploying an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM). Its latest test, in which four IRBMs were launched
into the Sea of Japan, may be just the beginning
of a new round of missile testing as the North
evidently seeks the ability to overwhelm
THAAD and pose a credible threat to
neighboring countries and in theory to the US
west coast. THAAD may be an improvement
over other antiballistic missile (ABM) systems,
and it has reportedly passed more tests than it
has failed. But time and again it has been
shown that ABMs cannot shoot down every
missile, which is presumably armed with
deycoys and penetration aids. And THAAD,
according to one expert, is “useless” against an
ICBM.² The Japanese, who already have an
ABM system (PAC-3), can’t feel all that much
more secure because of THAAD.

Though Kim Jong-un and his generals surely
are not suicidal, the new and inexperienced US
ambassador to the United Nations, Nikki Haley,
has just described Kim as “not rational.” Most
observers of North Korea over the years have
considered its strategic thinking every bit
rational given its history of seven decades of
rule, much of it under attack and/or blockade
by the United States, its coalition allies, and
South Korea. The view of North Korean leaders
has always been that their security is under
threat and that nuclear weapons and ballistic
missiles are their best means of defense from
threats—from deployment of THAAD to wipe
out the North’s missile advantage, from the
annual large-scale joint US-South Korean
exercise known as Foal Eagle that is now
underway, from US air and naval power
arrayed throughout East Asia, and from nuclear
threats such as the “kinetic options” that Haley
referenced. Pyongyang will most likely forge
ahead with nuclear and missile development so
long as the United States offers no incentives
that might incline Kim Jong-un to choose a
different route to security.

Meanwhile, the Chinese, who have railed
against THAAD for years, now may make their
own countermove. Their argument is that
THAAD threatens China’s strategic situation
because of its radar warning system, which
may reduce if not neutralize China’s ability to
respond immediately to an external attack.
Beijing has never been persuaded by US
arguments that THAAD is solely directed at
North Korean missiles. Since China sees
THAAD as actually directed at it, Beijing may
well respond by expanding its arsenal of
nuclear-tipped missiles. Launch-on-warning
might also become an attractive option for
China, a course that would greatly increase the
risk of nuclear war.

Another cost of THAAD deployment is the
sudden end of the China-South Korea
honeymoon. Until recently China was on a roll
with South Korea in everything from trade and
investment to tourism, entertainment, and
educational exchange.³ The two countries were
officially described as having a “matured
strategic cooperative partnership,” reflected in
much more frequent high-level contact between
Beijing and Seoul than between Beijing and
Pyongyang. THAAD has placed South Korea on
China’s enemy list: South Korean goods and
entertainers are being boycotted, and some
Chinese sources are calling for direct political
and even military action against South Korea.
This rupture bodes ill for Chinese cooperation
on UN-authored sanctions against North
Korea as well as for Chinese aspirations to
become as important to South Korea as the
Americans have traditionally been.⁴

Deployment of THAAD could not have come at
a worse time for South Korea. A constitutional
court has just ruled unanimously that President
Park Geun-hye must step down in the wake of
corruption charges. A new election will be held
within 60 days. By then THAAD may be fully
deployed as the US rushes to make the system
a fait accompli for the next South Korean
president. If Moon Jae-in, currently the front
runner and an admirer of Kim Dae-jung’s
Sunshine policy, is elected, he will face a very
difficult decision—whether to insist that
THAAD not be made operational and risk
angering Washington, or allow it to become operational and anger China and North Korea.

A Terminal High Altitude Area Defense interceptor being fired during an exercise in 2013, U.S. Department of Defense

Finally, THAAD adds to the mix of policy differences between China and the US. The Trump administration has thus far shown little interest in, and knowledge of East Asian affairs. The president has no legitimate Asia expertise to rely on, and has already made some serious missteps on China. The last thing Trump needs as he deals with “Russiagate” and numerous domestic challenges is a major dispute with China and an ever-enlarging strategic problem with North Korea. THAAD worsens his options. Whether Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, who is about to visit South Korea and China, will come to that conclusion is open to doubt. He too has limited experience in Asia and so far has been invisible in US policymaking.

China’s foreign minister Wang Yi has made an interesting proposal: “double suspension” to put a brake on the escalating situation. His idea is that the US and ROK would suspend their joint exercises in return for North Korea’s suspension of nuclear and missile tests, and all sides would return to the negotiating table. “Are both sides prepared for a head-on collision?” he asked. Evidently one of them is; Nikki Haley, joined by her Korean counterpart, dismissed Wang’s idea as not being at the right time. Instead, “I can tell you we’re not ruling out anything, and we’re considering every option,” Haley said. So who is not being rational?

Constantly talking up the North Korean threat and using it to justify ever more sophisticated and expensive antimissile technologies to defend against it is foolish and self-defeating. Diplomacy with North Korea is much more cost-effective. If Washington were in more experienced hands, it would indefinitely delay full deployment of THAAD or, if requested by a new South Korean president, decide not to operationalize it. Secretary Tillerson might, as a result of discussions with ROK leaders, announce on his current trip that future US-ROK exercises would depend on the security situation on the peninsula—a half-step toward Wang Yi’s proposal.

These moves would not resolve the nuclear issue with North Korea or turn around contentious relations with China. But sideling THAAD would reassure China—it might even provide a bargaining chip to freeze Chinese weapons deployments in the South China Sea. It would certainly remove a volatile issue from South Korean politics at a time of a national leadership crisis. If a new decision on THAAD were accompanied by revival of talks with North Korea, which a Moon Jae-in administration in Seoul is likely to initiate and which the Trump administration should support, it might put a brake on the drift toward confrontation. Unless the Trump administration starts paying attention to THAAD’s liabilities, it will face a cold-war style crisis at the same time that the United States and Europe are in the midst of another cold war standoff with Russia over Ukraine.

The multiple security issues in Northeast Asia are precisely why a regional multilateral security dialogue mechanism is essential, such as I’ve suggested in these pages. It would provide a venue for addressing common-
security issues such as climate change, public health and economic development in North Korea, sustainable energy, and a peace treaty ending the Korean War guaranteed by the major powers. To be sure, nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles are worrisome not only for the United States, the two Koreas, and China but for all nations in the region: China has a legitimate concern about having its nuclear deterrent compromised by THAAD, and the United States certainly wants strategic stability with China. The United States has a legitimate desire to defend against North Korean missiles that can reach Japanese and South Korean targets and one day soon the US west coast. But North Korea has an equally legitimate objective to strengthen its deterrent in the face of US, Korean, Japanese, and now Chinese pressures. And so it goes. Arguing about “defensive” and “offensive” weapons is likely to be a non-starter, however, unless some degree of mutual trust can be achieved first. North Korea’s arsenal of perhaps twenty nuclear weapons and its formidable missile capability present a much different challenge from a decade ago.

Previous regional diplomacy in Northeast Asia has produced results worth building on. The Six Party Talks in 2005 and 2007 created a reasonable menu of “action-for-action” steps, including economic and energy cooperation and normalization of diplomatic relations as well as denuclearization of the Korean peninsula. A dialogue mechanism can breathe new life into those talks, affording the opportunity to debate rather than fire away and consider small steps to defuse tensions. Absent such a mechanism, we can expect that the North Koreans will proceed with nuclear and missile development, China’s appeals to both North and South Korea will fall on deaf ears, and the US-ROK-Japan alliance will plot ways to pressure North Korea even more intensely rather than restart a dialogue with it. The consequences can be explosive.

Related articles

- Peter Hayes, Continuation of Policy By Other Means: Ensuring that US-ROK Military Exercises Don’t Increase Risk of War (http://apjjf.org/2017/06/Hayes.html)
- Mel Gurtov, Sanctions and Defiance in North Korea (http://apjjf.org/2016/09/Gurtov.html)
- Peter Hayes, Ending a Nuclear Threat via a Northwest Asia Nuclear Weapons-Free Zone (http://apjjf.org/2015/13/3/Peter-Hayes/4253.html)
- Mel Gurtov, Time for the U.S. to Engage North Korea (http://apjjf.org/2014/11/33/Mel-Gurtov/4166/article.html)

Notes


2 Jeffrey Lewis, “Are You Scared About North Korea’s Thermonuclear ICBM? (https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/02/19/are-you-scared-about-north-koreas-thermonuclear-icbm/)” Foreign Policy

3 In 2015 South Korea was first among importers of Chinese goods and China’s fourth largest export market, for a total trade of over $275 billion—slightly below China-Japan trade. Global EDGE, “China: Trade Statistics (https://globaledge.msu.edu/countries/china/tradestats),”


7 “Averting War in Northeast Asia—A Proposal (http://apjjf.org/2011/9/2/Mel-Gurtov/3467/article.html)”

8 After these words were written, the US military announced on the eve of Tillerson’s trip that it was deploying Grey Eagle drones to South Korea for “intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance.” The drones are capable of firing Hellfire missiles, though whether they would be armed with the missiles was not announced. Either way, the move represents a significant escalation of tensions. Julian Borger, “US to Deploy Missile-Capable Drones Across Border from North Korea,” The Guardian, March 14, 2017, online ed.