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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 billion¹—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 decoys 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-authorized 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.⁵ 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.⁶ 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 sidelining 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.⁷ 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.⁸ The consequences can be explosive.

Related articles

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Notes

¹ Jung Sung-Ki, “South Korea Eyes THAAD Despite China’s Fear (<http://www.defensenews.com/story/defense/show-daily/singapore-air-show/2016/02/14/south-korea-eyes-thaad-despite-chinas-fear/80067558/>),” *Defense News*, February 14, 2016

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/>),”

⁴ As one analysis put it in 2014, “Beijing no longer sees the need to choose between the two Koreas, and prevailing sentiment within China increasingly views the South as an asset and the North as a liability determined to frustrate Beijing’s policy goals.” Jonathan Pollack, “The Strategic Meaning of China-ROK Relations: How Far Will the Rapprochement Go, and With What Implications?”

(<http://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-strategic-meaning-of-china-rok-relations-how-far-will-the-rapprochement-go-and-with-what-implications/>)” Brookings Institution, September 29, 2014

⁵ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China, Wang Yi press conference (<http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/zyxw/t1444203.shtml>) of March 8, 2017 (Chinese text)

⁶ See here (<http://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/08/world/asia/china-north-korea-thaad-nuclear.html>)

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.