

# The Deployment of THAAD: the Evolving Policies of the ROK

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**A**s a major component of the US global missile defense network, the deployment of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense anti-missile system, commonly known as THAAD, in South Korea has implicated the regional balance of power and interstate relations. Not only has it undermined the offensive and defensive capabilities and nuclear deterrence of regional countries, thus destabilizing the strategic balance of the Asia-Pacific region, it has also given rise to competition among regional powers, which is hindering the settlement of the issues related to the Korean Peninsula and endangering peace and stability in Northeast Asia. Despite strong opposition from both China and Russia, South Korea decided to temporarily deploy the THAAD system on the grounds it nullified the threats presented by North Korea's missile program, with the purpose of consolidating the alliance between the United States and South Korea and ensuring the United States' provision of its extended deterrence and security guarantee. Therefore, it makes sense to analyze the background to South Korea's decision to deploy THAAD, as it helps us better understand South Korea's foreign policy and strategic orientation.

## THAAD Policies of the Park and Moon Administrations

For many years, the South Korean government took a very cautious approach to the United States' deployment of missile defense systems in the region.

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As early as during the Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun administrations, the United States invited South Korea to participate in its Theater Missile Defense (TMD) system. As the South Korean government at the time was carrying out a reconciliatory policy toward the North Korea and sought to play the role of a “balancer” in the geo-strategic structure of Northeast Asia, Washington’s suggestion did not receive a positive response from Seoul, which instead indicated a desire to build its own missile defense system.

Following Pyongyang’s third nuclear test in February 2013, the Obama administration stepped up the deployment of missile defense systems in the Asia-Pacific region, ostensibly citing the threat posed by North Korea, and deployed a THAAD system at Guam in April that year. It was at this time that the United States started actively lobbying Seoul to deploy THAAD. Considering that Japan had agreed to the United States deploying an X-band radar system at Air Self-Defense Force bases in Aomori and Kyoto respectively, why did the United States continue to advance THAAD in South Korea? First, the United States intended to integrate South Korea into the missile defense network that it dominates, and enhance the trilateral military cooperation between itself and Japan and South Korea. Second, in addition to the Patriot point-defense system against targets in their terminal phase of flight at low altitude, and the sea-based Aegis ballistic missile defense system that intercepts targets in mid-flight, the deployment in South Korea, Japan and surrounding areas of the THAAD area-defense system, which is intended to hit missiles in their terminal phase of flight at high altitude, would form a multi-layered missile defense network that combines point and area defense at both high and low altitudes, and enhance the probability of successful interception. Third, the THAAD system, with its X-band radar, is able to detect, search, track and identify long-range targets, thus gathering much useful intelligence. The deployment of THAAD in close proximity to China as well as Russia’s far eastern region would further weaken the strategic deterrence of the two countries. Under escalating pressure from the United States, the South Korean administrations of President Park Geun-hye and Moon Jae-in, despite their differences in

attitude and approach, have reached the same conclusion.

### **Policy changes of the Park government**

The attitude of the Park Geun-hye government toward THAAD changed from objection, to ambiguity, endorsement and finally accelerated implementation.

In October 2013, South Korean Defense Minister Kim Kwan-jin indicated that the Republic of Korea would not participate in the US-led missile defense network, nor would it consider introducing THAAD. However, after it was reported by *Kyunghyang Shinmun* on June 3, 2014 that Curtis Scaparrotti, then Commander of the United States Forces Korea, disclosed the deployment of THAAD in South Korea by the United States in a speech at the Korea Institute for Defense Analyses, the Seoul government's attitude turned ambiguous on this issue. On May 29, 2014, the spokesperson for South Korea's Ministry of National Defense said that, "This issue is still under review by the United States. The government will discuss it after the US formally requests assistance."<sup>1</sup> The ambiguity of the government's position was also reflected in the announcement of the Three Nos in March 2015, namely No Request, No Consultation, No Decision by the Blue House, which means Washington had not lodged any request with Seoul, and nor had Seoul consulted with Washington or made any decision on the matter. In October 2015, Mike Trotsky, Vice-President of Lockheed Martin, THAAD's manufacturer, revealed that the United States and South Korea were discussing the system's deployment in South Korea, but that news was swiftly denied by South Korea's National Defense Ministry. South Korea's ambiguity due to the fear of opposition from neighboring countries often led to contradictions between public comments of United States and the South Korean officials, inevitably arousing suspicion from other countries in the region.

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1 Hwang Gyeong-sang, "USFK Commander: THAAD Deployment in South Korea under Review," *Kyunghyang Shinmun*, June 3, 2014, [http://news.khan.co.kr/kh\\_news/khan\\_art\\_view.html?code=910302&artid=201406032122435](http://news.khan.co.kr/kh_news/khan_art_view.html?code=910302&artid=201406032122435).

The fourth nuclear test and subsequent satellite launch by North Korea gave rise to South Korea's determination to deploy THAAD. Following North Korea's nuclear test on January 6, 2016, President Park Geun-hye announced that South Korea would consider introducing THAAD for the sake of national security. Several hours after North Korea launched a satellite on February 7, 2016, South Korea's Korean National Defense Ministry indicated that it would formally start discussing the THAAD deployment issue with the United States. The two countries signed an agreement on March 4, 2016 on establishing a joint working group for THAAD, and began consultation of the system's location as well as the cost and timetable for its deployment. The United States agreed to continue providing a nuclear umbrella for South Korea, signed a new cooperation agreement concerning civil uses of atomic energy and gave South Korea nuclear waste disposal rights. The United States also offered concessionary terms that only required South Korea to accept THAAD deployment instead of purchasing the system, and exempted it from any additional costs besides providing land for the deployment of THAAD.<sup>2</sup> The two sides jointly announced on July 8, 2016 the decision to deploy THAAD, and confirmed on July 13, 2016 Seongju County in North Gyeongsang Province was to be the site for the system. The missile defense system would cover most US military bases and facilities, but the large area around the capital Seoul would not be covered by the system.

The United States and South Korea initially decided to ship THAAD equipment into South Korea by the end of 2017, but Hwang Kyo-ahn, who served as acting president following the impeachment and removal of President Park Geun-hye, and the South Korean military insisted on accelerating the deployment process. Under the pretext of testing the system in the joint military exercises held by the United States and South Korea, THAAD's entry into South Korea was conducted ahead of schedule. Obviously, the two countries were attempting to create a fait

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<sup>2</sup> Chen Yue, "THAAD Deployment in South Korea Destabilizes Regional Strategic Balance," *PLA Daily*, August 5, 2016, p.7.

accomplished before South Korea's presidential election in May 2017. On March 8, 2017, the South Korean military indicated that two launchers had been transported to South Korea and the remaining equipment was due to arrive in phases. On April 20, the necessary land provision process for the deployment of THAAD was completed according to the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) between the United States and South Korea. On April 26, the two launchers, the fire-control radar and the operational command and control station were transported into the designated location in Seongju, which was formerly Lotte Skyhill Country Club. A position paper published by the National Defense Ministry of South Korea on April 26 indicated that there would still be such normal procedures as environmental impact assessment, and that the military would completely acquire THAAD's anti-missile capabilities by the end of the year.

However, on the second day after the THAAD equipment arrived in Seongju, the Trump administration publicly demanded \$1 billion from South Korea for its deployment, arousing anger among South Koreans. On April 28, South Korea's National Defense Ministry responded that while according to SOFA the government should provide land and infrastructure for its deployment, the expenses for installing and operating the THAAD system should be covered by the United States. The US National Security Advisor H. R. McMaster clarified that the current bilateral agreement is valid until the two sides renegotiate on the relevant issues.

### **Policy changes of the Moon government**

The attitude of the Moon Jae-in administration towards THAAD has shifted from vacillation to support, and then to a decision of temporary deployment.

In the wake of the Park administration's decision to deploy THAAD, Moon Jae-in, then running for presidency, indicated that the deployment needed democratic discussions and approval from the National Assembly; the system should not be hastily put into operation without completing the required environmental assessment; and the THAAD issue should be

decided by the next administration.

When the deployment started, however, Moon's position also changed. "I don't think it is appropriate to simply cancel agreements reached by the South Korea and the United States." During an interview on April 17, 2017, Moon implied that South Korea would be pushed to deploy THAAD if North Korea continued expanding its nuclear forces. If Pyongyang sealed up its nuclear arsenal and returned to the negotiating table, Moon said, Seoul would delay the deployment; if North Korea completely abolished its nuclear weapons, it would simply become unnecessary to deploy the missile defense system.

After being elected president, Moon Jae-in expressed an intention to reconsider the THAAD deployment issue, and ordered an investigation into the remaining four launchers that were transported secretly into the South Korea to find out whether there were any procedural irregularity and deliberate omission to report. However, he also clarified in an interview with *The Washington Post* on June 20 that the requirement of environmental impact assessment did not mean postponing or canceling the deployment of THAAD. The decision was made by the previous administration, Moon said, "I have clearly indicated that I will not simply discard the decision."<sup>3</sup> At the same time, he also criticized the absence of an environmental assessment and public hearing in the deployment process, which he said was not consistent with democratic procedures and caused further domestic division and the deterioration of relations with foreign countries. Additionally, the deployment was not introducing new weapons into existing US bases, but providing a new military base for the United States. The land purchase alone would cost 100 billion won and thus constitutionally require congressional approval. It can be seen that President Moon is on one hand delivering his campaign promises while on the other hand being ambiguous to seek a balance between relations the

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3 "Environmental Assessment Does Not Mean Delaying or Canceling THAAD, Moon Says," *Yonhap News*, June 21, 2017, <http://chinese.yonhapnews.co.kr/allheadlines/2017/06/21/0200000000ACK20170621001100881.HTML>.

United States on one side and China and Russia on the other.

After the summit between the United States and South Korea in late June, North Korea's two intercontinental missile tests in July, and its sixth nuclear test in September, the Moon administration began to adopt a tougher position on THAAD. At a US State Department press briefing on July 6, spokesperson Heather Nauert revealed that the United States "had a very productive meeting with Mr. Moon when he came over here," and that Secretary of State Rex Tillerson "met with his counterpart, the foreign minister, here that same week and they had lots of discussions about the importance of THAAD." The United States, according to the spokesperson, would not change its position on THAAD despite China and Russia's opposition, and the deployment would continue.<sup>4</sup> Even though the two countries did not disclose the outcomes of their discussions on THAAD, it can be expected that South Korea and the United States reached some kind of tacit understanding. On July 28, Korean National Defense Ministry announced the environmental assessment plan on THAAD, and decided to conduct a "general assessment" of all land originally planned to be provided for US forces. Whether to deploy the remaining equipment will be decided according to the assessment results.<sup>5</sup> Soon after North Korea launched an intercontinental ballistic missile that night, Moon Jae-in convened a meeting of the National Security Council and ordered a temporary deployment of the remaining four THAAD launchers. On August 12, the Defense Ministry publicized an assessment report of electromagnetic radiation and noise at the THAAD base in Seongju, according to which the electromagnetic radiation within the base is well below the safety threshold for the human body, and the noise level is also well below the safety threshold, thus having almost no negative impact on the residents in the neighborhood. In the wake of Pyongyang's

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4 US Department of State, "Department Press Briefing," July 6, 2017, <https://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/dpb/2017/07/272393.htm#DPRK>.

5 "South Korean Government Decides to Subject All Land for THAAD to Environmental Assessment," *Yonhap News*, July 28, 2017, <http://chinese.yonhapnews.co.kr/allheadlines/2017/07/28/0200000000ACK20170728002200881.HTML>.

sixth nuclear test on September 3, South Korea's Ministry of Environment decided to conditionally approve the environmental assessment report on THAAD submitted by the Ministry of National Defense. On September 7, the US forces in South Korea transported four THAAD launchers to the Seongju base<sup>6</sup> and finished the installation of all six launchers on September 12, suggesting that the whole THAAD missile defense system has in fact been put into combat operation and its deployment has been completed. The latest development at the time of writing is the ROK Foreign Minister Kang Kyung-wha indicated at the UN National Assembly that the ROK would not participate in the US-led missile defense network, and would instead build its own system as soon as possible; it would not consider introducing more THAAD systems either.

## Considerations Behind the Policy Changes

The policy changes of the Park and Moon administrations on THAAD are due to domestic circumstances and factors involving the United States, North Korea, China and Russia.

**Domestic factors.** There have always been both supporting and opposing opinions on THAAD deployment in South Korea. The supportive voices mainly come from the hawkish faction of the military and pro-US conservatives, including the National Defense Ministry, the originally ruling Saenuri Party and its followers, some National Assembly members from the opposition camp and the elderly who value South Korea's alliance with the United States. In their opinion, THAAD is necessary in the face of the threats from North Korea, and even though relations with China will be compromised in the short term, they can be mended later on. They consider it of the utmost importance to consolidate South Korea's military alliance with the United States to safeguard national

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6 "Four THAAD Launchers Deployed and Missile Defense Company Takes Shape," *Yonhap News*, September 7, 2017, <http://chinese.yonhapnews.co.kr/newpgm/9908000000.html?cid=ACK20170907002800881>.

security. As for the voices opposing the deployment of THAAD, the most prominent are local residents in Seongju, some National Assembly members from the original opposition parties (the Democratic Party, the Justice Party and the People's Party) and their followers, and figures from the business community who have frequent trade ties with China. Their reasons for opposing THAAD include the lack of consent from local residents in Seongju, an absence of legitimate democratic procedures, the inability of the system to protect the security of the Seoul Capital Area, and embroiling South Korea into major-power competition in the region, and damaging the country's relations with China and Russia, as well as its own economy. In spite of this, the supportive opinion prevails generally, and has gained the upper hand as the tensions on the Korean Peninsula have escalated. Following the fourth nuclear test by North Korea, an opinion poll in South Korea by the Korean Broadcasting System (KBS) and the Yonhap News Agency on February 11-12, 2016, showed that 67.1 percent of respondents supported the deployment while 26.2 percent opposed it. A Gallup poll in the Republic of Korea on June 13-15, 2017, showed that 53 percent of respondents supported THAAD's deployment and 32 percent opposed it. After North Korea tested an intercontinental missile on July 28, a survey conducted by the Korean pollster Realmeter on August 2 indicated that 71 percent of respondents endorsed the deployment of the remaining four THAAD launchers while 18.4 percent objected to it.

**The US factor.** In order to curb China's rise, the United States, under the pretext of a threat from North Korea has strengthened military cooperation with Japan and South Korea through the Asia-Pacific missile defense network, which serves to preserve its regional and global hegemony. The United States has been actively pressuring South Korea to accept THAAD for years. During the 2013 US-ROK "2+2" meeting, the United States invited South Korea to participate in the US-led missile defense network, when the latter asked the former to delay handing over wartime operational control. The United States has also used North Korea's nuclear and missile development as an excuse to keep upgrading military pressure

and economic sanctions against Pyongyang, in the hope of aligning South Korea with the United States toward the North. The United States intends to rein in any rapprochement policy toward North Korea by Seoul, and it has even attempted to drive a wedge between South Korea and China and Russia. In order to advance the deployment of THAAD, the United States has not only agreed to bear the THAAD-related costs, but also been testing THAAD's interception capabilities on a frequent basis, once announcing the system had successfully intercepted an intermediate-range ballistic missile. The Ulchi Freedom Guardian military exercises between the United States and South Korea, which started on August 21 this year, by Commander of the US Pacific Command Harry Harris, Commander of the US Strategic Command John Hyten, and Commander of the Missile Defense Agency Samuel Greaves, indicated the United States intention to pressure South Korea.

**The North Korea factor.** North Korea turned the cold shoulder on the Park Geun-hye administration's Trust-Building Process on the Korean Peninsula, considering it to be the South's approach to "absorptive unification." While the Moon Jae-in administration originally intended to repair the inter-Korean relationship through rapprochement and cooperation, the sanctions-stricken North has remained indifferent as it accused the South of not showing sincerity and not abandoning the attempt to achieve "absorptive unification." In its opinion, its southern neighbor has been blindly following the United States and giving up its national autonomy, causing the reconciliatory and cooperative policy to stall. With the inter-Korean relationship seeing no signs of improvement in the short term, the South Korean government has come to believe that there is a real and imminent threat as the North continues to develop its nuclear warhead and missile technologies; that it is increasingly difficult to persuade the North into denuclearization through diplomacy, and the probability of crisis and conflict is on the rise; and that only an advantageous position in terms of security will guarantee negotiation with the North which leads to final resolution of the North Korean nuclear issue. Therefore, South Korea

will consider all measures in order to consolidate the alliance with the United States and safeguard its own security.

**China and Russia factors.** While the THAAD system is deemed vital to its national security and even sovereignty by South Korea, it is opposed by China and Russia who view it as destabilizing the regional strategic balance. The two countries assert that THAAD is unable to effectively counter attacks from North Korea, and is instead part of the United States' efforts to bridge the gap in its Asia-Pacific missile defense network. As a result, China and Russia have upgraded their bilateral comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination, and are addressing the issue with political, economic, diplomatic and military measures, including targeted penetration, deployment of counter weapons, joint military exercises, as well as economic boycotts and reduction of economic and people-to-people exchanges. The two countries have made a joint statement, emphasizing that the United States' alliances in the region should not damage the interests of third parties, and reiterating that the deployment of THAAD in Northeast Asia seriously endangers the strategic security of China, Russia and other regional countries, which is of no help to the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula and regional peace and stability, and should therefore be immediately halted and canceled. In response, South Korea has asserted that THAAD is defensive, rather than offensive, and will only be used in the radar's terminal mode to intercept missiles from North Korea, instead of the radar's forward-based mode to spy on China and Russia. South Korea has also indicated that it considers the economic "sanctions" and cultural "retaliation" aimed at forcing it to change its policy is interference in its national sovereignty, which, if they continue, would in turn intensify the anti-China mood in South Korea and damage China's image as a major power. The Seoul government hopes China will give up what it considers to be a "South Korea ban" and play a positive role in settling the Korean Peninsula nuclear issue to win back South Korean people's hearts, otherwise it will have to strengthen the trilateral security cooperation with the United States and Japan as well as economic ties with the Association of Southeast

Asian Nations (ASEAN), India and Japan to offset the impact of China's economic "penalty."

The policy changes of the South Korean government regarding THAAD are the result of the above four factors. Among them, the United States is the major driving force for THAAD's deployment in South Korea, with the threat posed by North Korea the alleged reason for its resolve, while China and Russia serve as restraints against the deployment. As its relations with the United States and North Korea weigh more in their calculations, despite serious opposition from China and Russia, the majority of South Korean people are in favor of the deployment of THAAD, and the Seoul government is also shifting from pursuit of an independent foreign policy to strengthening its alliance with the United States.

In President Park Geun-hye's considerations, the domestic and China/Russia factors played a major role at the beginning. Coming into office, Park hoped to find a way out of the "Asian Dilemma" and promote the Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation Initiative (NAPCI). In her opinion, the Trust-Building Process on the Korean Peninsula could only win support and steadily advance when relations in Northeast Asia stabilized. Through the close cooperation of the international community, particularly among the participants of the Six-Party Talks, she hoped North Korea would be integrated into the peace and cooperation process in Northeast Asia and return to the international community, thus settling the nuclear issue. Out of economic and geopolitical considerations, South Korea had not intended to sour its relations with China and Russia. In the wake of North Korea's third nuclear test, Seoul held a reserved attitude in the face of the United States' lobbying to deploy THAAD, hoping to build its own missile defense system and play a neutral and autonomous role among the competing powers.

As the United States under the Obama administration advanced its rebalancing strategy in the Asia-Pacific and viewed THAAD in South Korea as a step toward a missile defense network encircling China, the North Korean nuclear issue and the inter-Korean relations witnessed little progress. Against this background, Park, in the middle of her

term, gradually sided with the United States on THAAD and adopted an ambiguous strategy of secret negotiation and public denial. South Korea turned tougher towards the North, and the scale of its military exercises with the United States became larger, with scenarios of so-called emergencies and regime collapse in North Korea envisaged.

The later period of Park's term witnessed intolerance toward the North as the latter continued its nuclear and missile tests, and led to accelerated deployment of THAAD. For one thing, the government intended to make the deployment into a *fait accompli* that would be hard for the next president to overturn; for another, the deployment helped garner support from the United States, domestic conservatives and the military hawks, and distract the public from the scandal of the president's confidante Choi Soon-sil interfering in national politics.

Despite suspicion within South Korea that there was conspiracy or transmission of interests in the THAAD-related decision, some South Korean scholars believe that THAAD is the only alternative to the ROK having a missile defense system of its own, and argue it has been introduced to protect the life and property of South Korean people and the US forces stationed in the country. In order to effectively contain and repel Pyongyang's nuclear and missile attacks, South Korea has announced building its own three-axis system composed of the Kill Chain pre-emptive strike program, Korea Air and Missile Defense (KAMD), and the Korea Massive Punishment and Retaliation (KMPR) systems. As the KAMD system will not be completed until after 2020, South Korea has accepted the deployment of THAAD by the United States.<sup>7</sup> Other scholars insist

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7 Lee Dae-woo, "KAMD and THAAD," *Sejong Policy Bulletin*, No.6, 2017, <http://www.sejong.org>.

that THAAD is not a substantial countermeasure to safeguard South Korea's survival in the face of the North's nuclear provocations. South Korea intends to contain the nuclear threat from the North by relying on the extended deterrence provided by the United States and the combined defense system of the United States and South Korea. In their opinion, THAAD is a defensive weapon whose use is limited on the Korean Peninsula, and its deployment is a minimum self-defense measure to protect the ROK's national security.

We can see the strategic considerations of the Park administration to deploy THAAD from the domestic debate. First, South Korea, which benefits from the security umbrella of the United States, found it hard to turn down THAAD when the United States justified its deployment in South Korea as a way to protect its forces stationed on Korean territory. Since North Korea's fourth nuclear test, Seoul has adjusted its relations with the four neighboring major powers. It has not only deepened its alliance with the United States and stepped up trilateral cooperation with the United States and Japan, but has also supported the United States in its efforts to contain China, in the hope of pressuring China into imposing harsher sanctions against Pyongyang. Second, in the face of escalating external threats brought about by the North's rapidly developing nuclear and missile capabilities, the ruling party of South Korea, which lost its majority in the April 2016 National Assembly election, badly needed new countermeasures to soothe people's fears and maintain their support. Third, North Korea has not only given the cold shoulder to Park's Trust-Building Process on the Korean Peninsula and the Dresden Declaration, a proposal for Korean unification she made in the former East German city of Dresden, but has also further advanced its nuclear and missile development. Given this, South Korea has adjusted its policy toward the North from one of combining cooperation and pressure to one of maximum pressure, and withdrawn its enterprises from the Kaesong Industrial Zone, leading to a deterioration of inter-Korean relations. By doing so, the South hoped to pressure the North into denuclearization

and regime change. Fourth, the insistence of South Korea on introducing THAAD before repairing its relations with China and Russia, despite strong opposition from the two countries, reflected Seoul's political consideration to take advantage of the THAAD issue and pressure China and Russia to adopt a tougher attitude toward the North. The announcement of THAAD's deployment in South Korea, just days before the arbitral tribunal for the China-Philippine South China Sea arbitration issued its ruling, revealed the United States' intention to pressure China from both the north and the south. South Korea hoped to minimize China's backlash at the time of chaos, and has through its actions implicitly expressed dissatisfaction toward China for not "reining in" North Korea or implementing more severe sanctions.

In the later period of the election campaign and early days of his administration, Moon Jae-in's attitude toward THAAD vacillated. On the one hand, he hoped to win support from the United States and the majority of South Koreans in favor of THAAD's deployment. On the other, he sought to improve inter-Korean relations and ease tensions with China and Russia. During the campaign, Moon asserted Park's decision to deploy THAAD was undemocratic and not in accordance with normal procedures. However, his position swayed in the later period of the campaign, reflecting the influence of the escalating nuclear and missile crisis, the US factor and the Korean people's general support for THAAD.

President Moon first adopted an ambiguous strategy on THAAD, which temporarily saved "face" for neighboring countries and reserved South Korea a bargaining chip to maximize its own interests. Using the "THAAD card," Seoul intended to push China and Russia to help settle the nuclear and missile crisis as soon as possible, and pledged to find a better solution to the THAAD issue. On the other hand, it sought to persuade the United States to postpone the deployment on the grounds of environmental assessment and normal democratic procedures. The South Korean government not only intended to court the United States but also China and Russia, and also hoped to wait and see before making a decision.

While South Korea is militarily dependent on the United States, relying on the latter's protection to counter pressure from the North; on the other hand, it is inseparable from China and Russia in terms of its economy and geopolitics, seeking cooperation from those two countries on the nuclear issue and ensuring its own economic interests by restoring relations.

Several major strategic considerations are behind the Moon administration's policy and actions. First, warning North Korea by tough measures. After taking office, Moon put forward the Korean Peninsula Peace Initiative in Berlin, and proposed North-South military talks and meetings between the Red Cross of both sides. In the North's view, however, the South is still subordinate to the United States' command in developing inter-Korean relations, not adhering to the principle of Korean national autonomy and persisting with harsh sanctions against the North. Consequently, North Korea did not give a positive response to the South's initiative and went on developing an intercontinental ballistic missile, and the disappointed and enraged South could not help but adopt new tougher measures. Second, South Korea is still in need of the United States' protection. Despite a commitment to strengthening its own defense and taking over the wartime operational control from the United States, Moon was aware that South Korea was unable to guarantee its security alone and free itself from its alliance with the United States. Compromise and concession under pressure from the United States remains inevitable. Third, seeking high approval ratings, Moon has been dedicated to reforms and communication with the public after taking office, which has won him high popularity. Although domestic protests are still incessant and local people in Seongju have held hundreds of anti-THAAD candlelight rallies, the majority of South Korean people are still in favor of the deployment, which has emboldened the government to put the remaining four launchers into operation. Fourth, South Korea thought that the damage the deployment of THAAD would do to its relations with China and Russia would be limited. Despite some impact of counter-measures spontaneously launched by Chinese people on some industries such as tourism and South

Korean automobiles, the overall trade between the two countries has not been greatly affected. Seoul has not succumbed to economic pressures that might impair its sovereignty, which it considered would have long-lasting negative effects. Moreover, South Korea attempted to press China to revoke what it considered a “South Korea Ban,” and diverted the THAAD issue into a problem between China and the United States. In its opinion, China does not want to see the bilateral relationship further deteriorate, and therefore South Korea would like to continue defending itself in terms of technology and ease the pressure from China through China-South Korea-US dialogue.

Generally speaking, the United States and North Korea are the main factors that have led to South Korea’s policy change on THAAD. The United States has been pushing South Korea hard on this issue, in order to improve its global missile defense network and undermine China and Russia’s missile and nuclear deterrence capabilities. Completely dependent on the United States for its security, South Korea could not choose but to respect the United States over the THAAD issue. The deployment of THAAD is claimed by the United States and South Korea to counter the North’s threats, and the two countries have clearly objected to China’s “suspension for suspension” initiative, in which North Korea suspends its nuclear and missile activities in exchange for the suspension of large-scale US-ROK military exercises. Until Pyongyang finally returns to negotiations aimed at denuclearization, the United States and South Korea will continue their military exercises and strengthen sanctions even if the North suspends its nuclear and missile tests. On the part of North Korea, possession of nuclear weapons has been written into its Constitution and cannot be easily abandoned under external sanctions and pressure. As the two sides have no converging interests, the confrontation cannot be expected to be mitigated in the short term, which leaves an excuse for deploying THAAD and limits the policy choices of the previous and current administrations. Thus for Seoul, the opposition and condemnation from China and Russia, as well as the economic boycott by the Chinese public, cannot compare

with the United States, North Korea and domestic factors in terms of their importance.

## Prospects for THAAD Deployment

The current deployment of THAAD in South Korea is temporary, meaning that the six launchers are temporarily deployed within an area of 80,000 square meters that has undergone small-scale environmental assessment and is part of the 320,000 square meters of land provided by South Korea's National Defense Ministry to the United States' military. The launchers are currently placed on metal plates, and will not be moved to a concrete floor until the general environmental assessment is completed and their formal deployment is decided on.

Even though the final deployment of THAAD in South Korea is considered almost inevitable, it remains to be seen whether that will improve the situation on the Korean Peninsula. The possibility of revoking the deployment cannot be completely ruled out. Given this, there are two scenarios for THAAD's deployment in South Korea.

One is final deployment. Moon Jae-in emphasized on September 8, 2017, that the final deployment would be decided pending a stricter general environmental assessment.<sup>8</sup> Judging from the various factors, it will only be a matter of time before THAAD completes the general environmental assessment and normal democratic procedures. The current temporary deployment will probably become final. First, the United States will continue pushing THAAD until the system is permanently established. At the joint defense consultative meeting in September 2017, the United States reiterated its commitment of extended deterrence, which would be provided by all available military forces including the nuclear umbrella, conventional strike capabilities and missile defense capabilities, to effectively and overwhelmingly counter any threat from the North against the United States and its allies.

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8 "Moon: THAAD Deployment the Current Best Choice for Government," *Yonhap News*, September 8, 2017, <http://chinese.yonhapnews.co.kr/newpgm/9908000000.html?cid=ACK20170908006900881>.

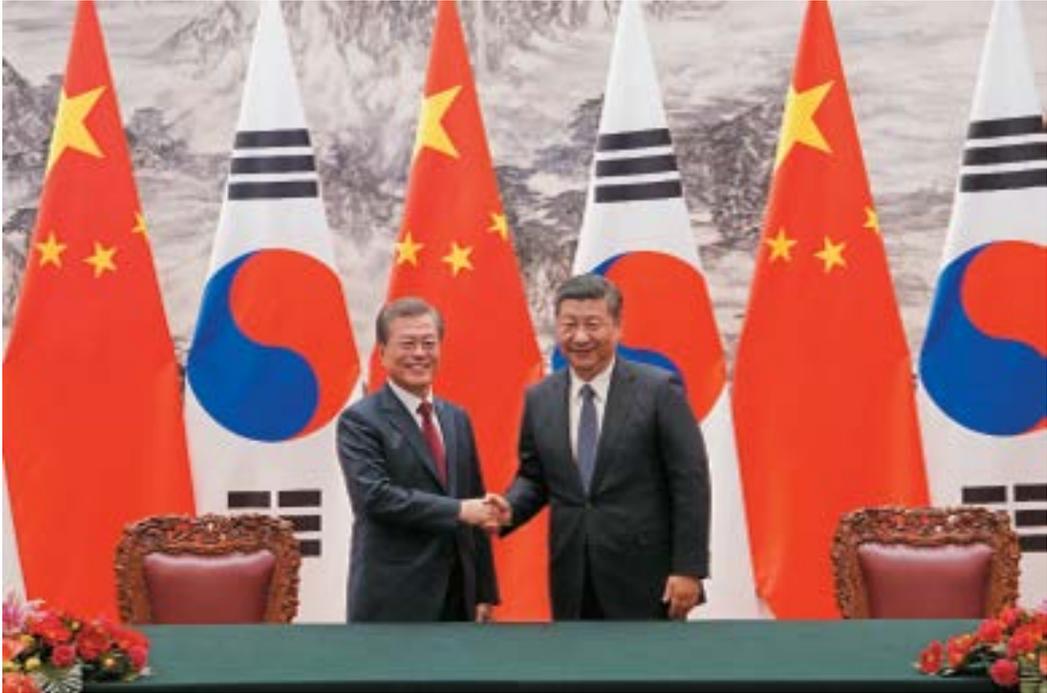
Second, South Korea considers the THAAD issue a matter of sovereignty, and will probably prioritize this and the United States and North Korea factors over the likely opposition from China and Russia. It can be seen from the previous small-scale environmental assessment that the procedure closely matches the process of deployment. In the wake of North Korea's sixth nuclear test on September 3, South Korea's Ministry of Environment decided the next day to conditionally approve the assessment report submitted by the National Defense Ministry. In fact, the items originally required in the report, related to electromagnetic radiation outside the base, the impact on flora and fauna, and the concentration of fine particulate matter, have not been completed. On the other hand, despite the importance South Korea attaches to the THAAD issue, the government hopes to clarify to China and Russia that the system is not targeted at the two countries through some kind of statement and promise, and repair the damaged relations with them. Third, as there is no sign of the tensions on the Korean Peninsula cooling down, it is not easy to solve the North Korean nuclear and missile issue in the short term. With the United States, Japan and South Korea stepping up their diplomatic isolation, economic blockage and military threat against North Korea, it is highly unlikely that the North will compromise, let alone denuclearize, in the short run. On the contrary it will retaliate tit for tat, which will further push South Korea into formally deploying THAAD. Fourth, domestically people in favor of THAAD are in the majority, and the conservative forces are still campaigning for its final deployment. The government also intends to protect its own security by strengthening its alliance with the United States. In the meeting between President Moon and leaders from four ruling and opposition parties on September 27, 2017, Bareun Party whip Joo Ho-young suggested increasing defense spending and introducing three more THAAD launchers. Although Moon has emphasized that he would not consider introducing additional THAAD equipment for the time being, the possibility of the conservatives urging the deployment of additional THAAD systems can be expected if the state of affairs on the Peninsula deteriorates.

The other is revoking deployment. This would mean dismantling

the existing THAAD equipment. If the tensions on the Korean Peninsula showed signs of de-escalation, the nuclear and missile issue moved in the direction of peaceful settlement, and North Korea agreed to denuclearize, then the United States and South Korea could no longer justify deploying THAAD. However, according to the current situation, revoking deployment is confronted with great difficulties. In the short run, due to the steadfastness of the United States' decision to deploy THAAD, the tension on the Korean Peninsula is likely to continue. In the long run, it is very difficult to demand North Korea to give up its nuclear weapons program, which the country sees as a potent means of safeguarding the regime and national security, and has made it clear won't be used as a bargaining chip. From its perspective, the United States should first give up its antagonism and nuclear posture toward North Korea and sign a peace agreement. On the part of the United States, it is unwilling to give an inch, and there is a lack of political trust and a divergence of goals between the two countries, making the path towards denuclearization on the Korean Peninsula a long and hard one. However, there are also a few scholars arguing that in the Korean three-axis system to be built by the South Korean military, the possibility of South Korea developing a localized missile defense system to partially or entirely replace THAAD cannot be ruled out.

The deployment of THAAD by South Korea and the US is moving far beyond their bilateral relations, which will have negative impacts on the geopolitical structure of Northeast Asia and will damage peace and stability in this region.

First, it hurts the strategic interests of China and Russia, and destroys the strategic balance among China, the United States and Russia. To major countries such as China, the United States and Russia, maintaining nuclear strike capabilities against strategic targets on each other's homeland is the basis for safeguarding national security, avoiding a war among the great powers, and maintaining global strategic stability. The deployment of THAAD in South Korea will harm the strategic nuclear deterrence of China and Russia against the US. Facing the tilting of strategic balance



Chinese President Xi Jinping and the ROK President Moon Jae-in witness the signing of bilateral cooperation documents on December 14, 2017 during Moon's first state visit to China since he took office. The two sides have agreed to properly handle the THAAD issue and remove the obstacles to bilateral relations.

in Northeast Asia in favor of the United States, China and Russia will have to respond by further strengthening their strategic coordination and pragmatic cooperation, as well as adopt political, economic, diplomatic, military and other counter-measures.

Second, it will damage relations among regional countries, which will do harm to building trust and improving relations among relevant countries. The deployment of THAAD in South Korea will deepen the antagonism between North and South Korea, and go against the alleviation of tensions on the Korean Peninsula. North Korea believes that South Korea does not adhere to the principles of “national autonomy” and “national unity”, does not show any goodwill for the improvement of North-South relations, but is instead engaging in intra-nation confrontation that will have a detrimental effect on restarting inter-Korean dialogue and prevent any real improvement in bilateral relations. The deployment of THAAD in South Korea shows

that the United States is going to keep pressure on North Korea, and North Korea will step up against the antagonistic policy of the US, harming the possibilities for direct dialogue between them. For China-US relations, the forceful push of THAAD by the United States under the pretext of North Korean provocation will definitely harm the strategic trust and exacerbate rivalry between the two countries. For China-ROK relations, the deployment of THAAD, as it threatens China's national security, will also damage the political and diplomatic trust between the two sides. Moreover, the use of THAAD radar to probe the ballistic missile intelligence in Russia's Far East will further exacerbate the already fragile Russia-US relations and affect Russia-ROK relations.

Third, it will escalate the disputes between the United States and South Korea on one side and North Korea on the other, making resolving the North Korean nuclear and missile issue more difficult. South Korea originally deployed THAAD in the hope of ensuring its own security, while exerting pressure on North Korea to force it to give up its nuclear weapons program, but the deployment of THAAD cannot solve South Korea's security concerns. On the contrary, it is tying itself to the American war wagon, serving as an outpost and pawn in the United States' strategic confrontations, and bearing unnecessary risks. For a long time, North Korea has been declaring the US military as the key factor in the tensions on the Korean peninsula, and has been strongly against the US military deploying any new weapon on the peninsula, including the THAAD system. With THAAD deployed in South Korea, North Korea will definitely react by stepping up its missile launches, making resolving the North Korean nuclear and missile issue more difficult. According to statistics, North Korea tested 16 missiles when Kim Jong-il was in power from 1994 to 2011, and 88 (as of September 15, 2017) since Kim Jong-un took over in 2011, among which 46, or over half of all missiles launched, were tested since 2016.<sup>9</sup> As the United States and South Korea are

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9 Joshua Berlinger, "North Korea's Missile Tests by the Numbers," *CNN*, updated September 18, 2017, <http://edition.cnn.com/2017/05/29/asia/north-korea-missile-tests/index.html>.

deploying THAAD to seek a new military edge, North Korea is certain to embark on vigorously developing nuclear weapons and missiles, as well as improving its defense penetration capabilities. The resolution of the North Korean nuclear weapons issue will become even more remote.

## Conclusion

By evaluating the policy evolution of the THAAD deployment by the current South Korean administration and its predecessor, it is revealing that as they were coming into office, both administrations put more emphasis on foreign policy independence and tried to maintain a balance among the major powers. Both the Park and Moon governments once stressed political reconciliation and economic cooperation between South and North Korea, while striving for a peaceful resolution of the North Korean nuclear issue and a permanent peace mechanism on the Korean Peninsula. However, as North-South relations balked and tensions on the Peninsula escalated, both administrations turned to confronting North Korea by strengthening the US-ROK alliance, which not only reneged on their original intentions, but also risked harming strategic security interests of neighboring countries. This scenario makes the situation on the Peninsula devolving into a vicious cycle of hard-line confronting hard-line and a continuous escalation of tensions, which is not only unhelpful to resolving the North Korean nuclear issue, but also harmful to the peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula and Northeast Asia. Looking to the future, only if South Korea is able to adhere to an independent foreign policy, which requires it to possess independent national defense capabilities, will it be able to proceed with an approach of engagement, dialogue and cooperation, and so play an active and constructive role in the affairs on the Korean Peninsula, and help realize long-term peace and stability in Northeast Asia. 🇰🇷