

THAAD Deployment in South Korea: Not a Threat to China?

CAO Shigong

Korean Peninsula Research Society, Chinese Association of Asia-Pacific Studies

저자 CAO Shigong is a researcher at the Korean Peninsula Research Society, Chinese Association of Asia-Pacific Studies, and previously, served as an Economic Daily News correspondent in Seoul.

* 이 글에 포함된 의견은 저자 개인의 견해로 제주평화연구원의 공식입장과는 무관합니다.

The issue of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) deployment on South Korean soil has been drawing attention in and outside of South Korea. China has expressed its concern over the United States' constant pressure on and leverage over the Republic of Korea. The disagreement between the South Korean left and right, as well as public disagreement over THAAD deployment, have escalated. Confronted with this tense situation, the Park administration now has a dilemma. According to one authority, the Korean government is said to be intentionally sustaining a strategic ambiguity.

Under these circumstances, Woo Jung-yeop, Research Fellow at the Asan Institute for Policy Studies, recently published a thesis titled “Does THAAD pose a threat to China?” on JPI PeaceNet with the goal of presenting policy recommendations to the Korean government and shaping public opinion.

Dr. Woo, in his thesis, publicly defends the missile defense strategy of the United States and strongly denies that THAAD deployment to South Korea is a threat to regional security or to Russian and Chinese national security. This is followed by a serious distortion of China's intentions in opposing the deployment. In his thesis, Woo goes so far as to claim that China's stance toward the THAAD deployment can be interpreted as siding with North Korea. These preposterously fallacious arguments have to be analyzed and disputed.

In the same thesis, Dr. Woo, based on the US concept of “defending the territory of the United States against limited ballistic missile attack”, asserts that the US nationwide anti-missile program is not designed to be a shield against Russia and China, but rather the estimated 6,300 ballistic

missiles beyond the direct control of the US, NATO, Russia, and China. These arguments, however, are undeniably far from the truth.

As is well known, the US had already begun working on the development of a ballistic missile defense system in the mid-1950s. Subsequently, the Reagan administration, in order to counter the former Soviet Union, launched the strategic defense initiative (SDI) known as Star Wars, which later transformed into the national missile defense (NMD) system and the theater ballistic missile defense (TMD) system. As its main enemy had vanished with the dissolution of the Soviet in the early 1990s, the US introduced a new concept of “limited defense.” Whereas the previous mission of the US missile defense system had been to prevent the United States from being subjected to nuclear blackmail by the Soviet Union, it was now to protect against accidental or unauthorized ballistic missile attacks on the US, US overseas forces, and its allies or partners. The point, therefore, is that the US missile defense strategy is not set in stone. Revisions can be made at any time according to the objective of defense and changes in defense preparation. “Limited defense” should thus only be taken as a phased concept that does not represent the entirety of US missile defense strategies.

In fact, the scope of “limited defense” has changed and is not at all “limited.” With its massive nuclear arsenals and formidable missile capabilities, Russia as a resurgent great power will inevitably become the subject of US missile defense. Meanwhile, seen as a challenger to US hegemony for its economic development and comprehensive power, China has also become a target of suppression by the United States. In this regard, that the US missile defense system targets China is no longer a secret.

This is supported by several facts. The United States, in its quadrennial defense review in 1997, forecasted that Russia and China could grow into regional powers or new world superpowers after 2015. In addition, a report published in the summer of 1998 under the direction of then US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld under the Ford and Bush administrations, reached the conclusion that Chinese long-range missiles, modernized nuclear weapons, and the diffusion of its correlation techniques could pose threats to the United States. This report insisted that early preparation was required for the United States. Additionally, in their book titled *Preventive Defense*, William Perry and Ashton Carter wrote that China, currently a level-2 threat, will become a level-1 threat to the United States in the twenty-first century. In fact, in recent years some United States Congress members and even government officials have, both in public and in private, exaggerated the threat of Chinese missiles. They have insisted that the US government regard China as the virtual enemy in the NMD system and restructure its missile strategies accordingly. Washington also stated openly that it is considering introducing Taiwan into the US missile defense system depending on changes in security situations and that it has already constructed a radar system in Taiwan designed for missile detection.

All these suggest that the US missile defense system targets China.

As Washington has itself admitted that Beijing is one of the principal missions of its missile defense system, a non-American scholar's argument to the contrary seems hardly convincing. Dr. Woo insists that "the US ballistic missile defense system is neither intended against China nor capable of being used for that purpose" a statement that holds poorly to empirical facts.

He affirms that the US, concerned with a highly costly arms race and an increase in the possibility of war, does not intend to target Russia and China. He further states that "targeting China does not align with any strategic benefits for the US." As mentioned above, however, the targeting of Russia and China by the US missile defense system is firmly aligned with US strategic interests.

The first strategic benefit is that a reinforcement of the US missile defense system means a relative weakening of the other side's defense system, which will strengthen the US attack capabilities in return. Through such a "two-track strategy" that simultaneously develops attack and defense capabilities, the US is able to establish absolute strategic predominance by constituting a stronger threat to and restraint over its counterparts. Furthermore, the US can depend on the said absolute strategic predominance to seize the initiative and launch a preemptive strike when needed. Therefore, the proposition that the US is concerned about a costly arms race and an increase in the possibility of war is unfounded.

Secondly, despite the US claim that it does not want to spark a new arms race, an arms race remains a powerful weapon for defeating an enemy. Various reasons for the collapse of the Soviet have been proposed, but the primary reason is considered to be an excessive use of national power caused by the overall arms race with the US. Enticing an enemy into the trap of an arms race would therefore strategically benefit the US.

Thirdly, strengthening military alliances is an important measure for developing a "strategic rebalancing strategy." The US missile defense system is an intricate military system comprising a series of interdependent sub-systems, including detection, approach warning, launch, storage, and transport, constructed between participating nations and regions. Strengthening its military alliances has the same effect as augmenting its existing military alliances and as forming new military alliances. Some military commentators believe that once the "integration" of missile defense system between the US, Japan and South Korea is completed, the practical formation of a trilateral military alliance will be accelerated.

Meanwhile, Dr. Woo draws the conclusion that establishing a missile defense system aimed at Russia and China is unrealistic for two reasons: One is that the US missile defense system is not capable of perfectly intercepting missiles launched by Russia or China the other is that the US cannot afford

the astronomical cost of creating a missile defense system. Finally, he adds that the US must depend on mutual deterrence with Russia and China. This conclusion, however, seems to be subjective and dogmatic.

The error in his judgement lies in the fact that he underestimates the American ambition for world hegemony as well as the superiority of American technical prowess. The goal of the United States is to maintain its position as the sole hegemonic power in the world while keeping any latent challenger in check. The US is undoubtedly committed to staying in power at any cost even if the establishment of a missile defensive system were like “shoveling sand against the tide” as Dr. Woo puts it. Whatever conflicts of interest there may have been, the US has never wavered in its expansion of investment which stems from confidence in its strategic willpower and capability. The success rate in intercepting incoming missiles has constantly improved through its steady, long-term endeavors, which gives the US strategic initiative in deterrence. Given these favorable conditions, it is unlikely that the US would be satisfied with a “limited deterrence strategy” and abandon a missile defense system targeting the two rival powers, Russia and China.

Dr. Woo adds that where radars with similar or better specifications have already been installed in Japan and Taiwan, it is not plausible that another radar system would be deployed in South Korea for the purpose of keeping China under US surveillance. This statement is not persuasive as it disregards facts and is logically flawed.

As mentioned above, given its ambition for world hegemony and the practical necessities of missile defense, the US has chosen the regions for the deployment and construction of its global defense system. Interconnected defense sites have been formed and each site has been assigned a uniquely distinct role in the system. Deploying a missile defense system at a strategically important site and close to a defense target is an important principle of the US missile defense system. This explains why the US, already having surveillance radars in Taiwan and Japan, will still make every effort to deploy THAAD in South Korea. Therefore, it is a premature conclusion that the THAAD deployment to South Korea is not intended to keep China under US surveillance.

I have clarified above the strategic goal of the US missile defense system in terms of strategic deterrence, preemptive strike capabilities, creating an arms race, and strengthening military alliances. If completed, the THAAD deployment in South Korea will pose a threat to China. In fact, because of South Korea's important strategic position, the threat of THAAD to China would be too strong to ignore.

Located in the heart of Northeast Asia, South Korea is critically situated in the Asia-Pacific as an ally of the US. Geographically, it is adjacent to the Chinese mainland, especially to Beijing China's

heartland, to Cheon-jin, which is the cultural center, and to various Northeast Asian industrial and military bases. If THAAD is deployed in South Korea, China will inevitably be under the close scrutiny of the United States' surveillance systems. The more important thing to note is that the trilateral military alliance between the US, Japan and South Korea will be enhanced due to the integration of missile defense between the three countries, which will lead to a corresponding disturbance in the regional strategic balance and stability. In this scenario, North Korea cannot be ignored, as it will be pressured to use every means, including nuclear deterrence, for resistance. Consequently, the Korean Peninsula and Northeast Asia may be dragged into constant conflict, chaos, and even war. In this regard, there is no guarantee that the THAAD deployment to South Korea will not threaten regional stability in Northeast Asia.

Dr. Woo strongly denies the possibility that THAAD poses a substantial threat to China and even adds that "THAAD deployment is irrelevant to China." He has distorted China's stance of opposing THAAD deployment in South Korea by claiming that China aims to weaken and eventually bring down the ROK-US alliance while siding with North Korea's hazardous policies. He offers two justifications: The first is that potential internal uncertainty and instability in North Korea are not desirable for China the second is that China does not want to push North Korea into a situation where coercive diplomacy and provocative acts are not allowed. This is a nonsensical inference that needs to be refuted.

There is one more thing I would like to stress. In establishing a new type of major power relationship with the US, China has unequivocally adhered to policies aimed at peace and security of the Korean Peninsula, specifically the policy of "no war, no instability, no nukes," that of promoting dialogue, and that of supporting Korean reunification. This is a matter of observable fact.

Regarding Chinese policies toward the US, China does not defy US hegemony but has acknowledged the benefits of an American presence in the Asian region. When it comes to the ROK-US military alliance and US armed forces in South Korea, China has neither opposed the alliance nor required the withdrawal of US armed forces from South Korea since the end of the Cold War, although in principle it has opposed the stationing of troops in other nations more generally. While China has protested against actions that intensify tension in the region, it also appreciates the role of the ROK-US military alliance and of the US armed forces in South Korea in the context of Korea's historical background, as both have been critical in maintaining power balance on the Korean Peninsula and in deterring war. In this regard, it is absurd to insist that "China is trying to collapse the ROK-US military alliance."

Additionally, China has firmly opposed North Korea's possession of nuclear weapons and has implemented the United Nations Security Council Resolution on North Korea. China supports peace and

security on the Korean Peninsula and has made it clear that it firmly opposes nations that threaten such. North Korea is one of those nations. One of the most important reasons for China's opposition to the THAAD deployment in South Korea is that it may provoke Pyongyang, undermine the current situation on the Korean Peninsula and cause a severe complication in the denuclearization process. This has been well acknowledged by the rest of the world, and it is far from fair to condemn China for siding with North Korea.

Dr. Woo makes two policy proposals to the Korean government. First, Seoul cannot sustain strategic ambiguity. Instead, it needs to assert that "THAAD deployment is irrelevant to China." and that "China's stance toward the matter can be interpreted as siding with North Korea." Second, that argument with little solidity should be put aside and the Korean government should instead establish missile defense strategies and policies adaptable to "South Korea's security, budgetary concerns and, most importantly, North Korea's missile threat."

Dr. Woo asserts that THAAD deployment should be considered based on the logic of national interest. Does THAAD deployment align with the national interest of South Korea? Based on the analysis above, I am confident that the reader can easily reach the same conclusion as mine. It has to be pointed out again that THAAD deployment in South Korea is closely tied to Chinese strategic interests and that the Chinese government will not idly stand by. According to newspaper reports, Chinese President Xi Jinping expressed a negative stance toward the THAAD deployment in South Korea during the Korea-China summit in January last year. In addition, it is reported that Chang Wanquan, the Chinese Minister of Defense, voiced concerns regarding THAAD deployment in South Korea at the Korea-China defense ministerial talks on February 4th this year. These constitute a strong message that China has sent to South Korea, one which suggests that Beijing understands Seoul has made efforts to protect its national security and strengthen the ROK-US alliance, yet South Korea must not do so at the expense of China's national security interests or those of the East Asian region. Therefore, if the Korean government enforces THAAD deployment under the influence and pressure of the US despite China's deep concern, it is inevitable that Korea-China relations will be significantly affected, for which the Korean government will have to take responsibility. I strongly urge the Korean government to make a wise decision that takes into account its national interest and, from a broader viewpoint, regional peace and stability.

February 5, 2016