Jeju Peace Institute 제주평화연구원

JPI PeaceNet

THAAD Deployment: A Chinese Perspective

ZHENG Jiyong

Director of Center for Korean Studies, Fudan University in Shanghai

저자 Director of Center for Korean Studies, Fudan University in Shanghai

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

The THAAD discussion in Korea is an emerging issue that is drawing attention from all across China. China is sensitive to the deployment of THAAD for a number of reasons.

I. Concerns over Regional Politics

From a political standpoint, China is concerned that THAAD deployment will cause unexpected political disorder within East Asia.

At the level of international politics, stability and peace of Northeast Asia would be threatened if THAAD were to be deployed in the Korean Peninsula. Under extremely shaky international circumstances, Northeast Asia has maintained stability and peace with great effort. Fortunately, there has not been any significant conflict. With one of the most competitive arms race ongoing, Northeast Asia is faced with a spiral security dilemma of historical conflicts, territorial disputes, and maritime collisions. Under such circumstances, introducing THAAD will no doubt destroy Northeast Asia's vulnerable peace and stability and chaos as in Ukraine. Peace and stability in Northeast Asia are of the greatest benefit to and the ultimate goal for China and South Korea. Any action that threatens peace and stability of the region will be met with fierce criticism.

Even at the level of the Korean Peninsula, THAAD is not an optimal solution. The development of the shield depends on that of the spear but at the same time falls behind. The Peninsula's peace,

stability, and denuclearization should be achieved through disarmament, anti-nuclear campaign and reconciliation. The vicious cycle of meeting force with force Cold-War style that only exacerbates the security dilemma is not a desirable option. THAAD might provoke North Korea into developing more high-tech retaliatory weapons and therefore destroy grounds for reconciliation that have been carefully maintained. Strictly speaking, THAAD is more likely to develop into an offensive weapon than a defensive one, posing a greater threat to regional stability. In China and South Korea, THAAD has not only divided domestic politics but has also become an obstacle to friendly relations between the two countries. After THAAD became a political agenda, South Korea has seen serious socio-political divisions resulting in verbally aggressive attacks from both sides. This has brought new challenges to the rapidly warming China-South Korea relations. Russia has also expressed concern over THAAD. What seemed to be at first a simple issue is disrupting relations between the U.S., China, and Russia. South Korea is faced with diplomatic conundrum over the three countries.

II. Real-world implications of the THAAD

Though not a weapons expert, as an international politics scholar and from the perspective of the public, I think THAAD has detrimental real-world implications.

With an extremely limited function, THAAD cannot intercept North Korea's nuclear weapons and missiles. The claim that THAAD's stated target are North Korean rather than Chinese or Russian weapons is delusional. Assuming North Korea possesses tactical nuclear warheads and loading equipment, the time lapse between launch and attack would be extremely brief given the Korean Peninsula's geography. Even with a successful THAAD interception, the southern regions in South Korea might still fall within the explosive range or at least be contaminated. Meanwhile, my personal observation is that nuclear weapons are only a means to boost North Korea's self-confidence and North Korea does not yet have the ability or intention to use nuclear weapons in an actual combat scenario. The probability of a nuclear war in Northeast Asia is very low. Low-altitude aircrafts and cannons are the real threats that South Korea faces, which THAAD cannot target. Therefore THAAD, which does not respond to nuclear weapons and cannons, provides little more than a peace of mind.

Furthermore, THAAD deployment may come across as a sign of hostility and threat. Some scholars argue that unnecessary conflict with China can be avoided by reducing THAAD's radar output or adjusting its direction. Others question the legitimacy of China's concern by pointing to existing THAAD's radar deployment in Japan and Taiwan. While these could be reassuring messages to China, they are flawed arguments. Reducing radar output or adjusting direction in order to avoid conflict with China leaves room for increasing output levels and changing directions in the future when

necessary. This creates anxiety instead of relief. Second, even if an agreement is reached on such a method, it remains a question as to who will be in control of the technicals and ensure China will not be targeted. Third, even if weapons are already deployed near China, China will not want an increase of such weapons in nearby regions. The argument that South Korea may harbor hatred toward China because other countries have accommodated similar systems is absurd. Taiwan is en route to reunification under China's Anti-Secession Law. Japan is involved in historical and territorial disputes with China, as it also continues to expand its arms race with China. It would not be wise for South Korea-China relations to degenerate into the semblance of Sino-Japanese relations.

Granted that THAAD is indeed a response to North Korea's nuclear weapons, an accurate evaluation of North Korea's nuclear and missile capability is necessary. If North Korea's nuclear weapons are a substantial threat to U.S. and South Korea, active effort should be made to resolve the nuclear issue rather than to provoke North Korea with the THAAD deployment. This is because the nuclear weapon development process is difficult to reverse whereas THAAD deployment is only a matter of time and space. However, the attitude of countries including U.S. and South Korea toward resuming talks about the nuclear issues appears passive. Yet if the nuclear issue is not a matter of urgency, why rush to deploy such an expensive and controversial weapon system? The first step toward solving North Korea's "threat" is not THAAD, but resuming negotiation. The negotiation table is the real starting point of peace weapons can only become an initiative for war.

The divergent different assessments of North Korea's nuclear and war-fighting capability aside, the greatest threats to South Korea are North Korea's military forces such as massive special units, conventional weapons and WMD, and potential chaos from the fall of the North Korean regime. South Korea's armed forces and U.S. armed forces in Korea already maintain dominant position in the Korean Peninsula. To respond to a large-scale crises in the Korean Peninsula, South Korea and the East Asian countries must make informed strategic decisions.

III. Post-THAAD deployment concerns

Assuming that THAAD is deployed, South Korea will face many challenges.

First, it will disrupt military strategic balance between great powers. Information is of utmost importance in contemporary warfare. Information collection relies on 'eyes and ears,' that is, informants that provide battlefield information in a radar-like fashion. But these informants are also the first to receive a blow from the battlefield. Analyses show that THAAD can provide an early warning within a short time (0-3 minutes). As a result, eastern and northeastern China and far eastern

Russia will lose the advantage of strategic preemptive strikes. On the other hand, if a large-scale regional war or a full scale war between superpowers were to occur, there is no doubt that the first targets would be strategic warning systems deployed in Japan, Taiwan, and Hawaii. China is concerned that THAAD deployment in South Korea will be a lead of the United States' "return to Asia" and a means of probing China's security bottom line.

The nuclear issue in the Korean peninsula may thus fall into an irreversible abyss. Stability, peace, and reunification are the ultimate goal for all Koreans. The solution to nuclear weapons is not high-tech weapons but stability within the Korean Peninsula. THAAD deployment will meet North Korean resistance and a chain reaction from other countries. Therefore, nuclear disarmament negotiation will become more difficult and offset the stability that all sides have worked hard to achieve. THAAD is not a proper response to North Korea's nuclear weapons. Rather, it will make North-South exchange more difficult. North Korea has professed that it will reinforce nuclear capability, which may lead to a permanent state of division.

THAAD issues will most likely impact South Korea-China relations. THAAD is in conflict with China's red line on the Korean Peninsula. Maintaining peace and stability within the Korean Peninsula is of core interest to China and China will not allow a war at its doorstep regardless of the initiator. It did not tolerate one 60 years ago, as it will even less today. Both South Korea and China share the recognition of, and the maximum benefits from, the Maginot line. China has regularly sided with South Korea regarding North Korea's nuclear weapons and security on the Korean Peninsula, and has sought South-North stability through political development, security exchange and anxiety management. To the extent that the Peninsula's peace and stability were not threatened, China were even willing to accommodate South Korea-U.S. military drills. When the state of affairs on the Korean Peninsula changed, China warned that it "will not allow mischief at the door." China has displayed good diplomacy by befriending a "past enemy" South Korea a hard-earned relationship that China highly values. For this reason, senior officials including President Xi Jinping and other party and military officials have been repeatedly urging South Korea to forgo THAAD deployment.

Attention to the Korean peninsula's security is rapidly expanding perhaps excessively so. Marx once said "only a decayed tooth remains in your world when you have a toothache." Media reports on South Korea-China relations and South Korea-U.S. relations have revolved around THAAD as if it were an insurmountable obstacle and to the neglect of other important issues. Ultimately, the THAAD issue starts from North Korea's nuclear development from which the solution should also be sought. As the Bible says "render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and unto God the things that are God's", THAAD must be considered strictly under the general issue of North Korea's nuclearization before any cross-reference to other issues is made. Meanwhile China and South Korea

must consider each other's standpoint and media in both countries should refrain from exacerbating the tension. Staying put may be more conducive to rational decision-making.

Under current circumstances, a solution that responds to North Korea's threat and contains escalation within the Peninsula is needed. Resolution of the THAAD issue depends on the progress of North Korea's nuclear situation. THAAD should not be conceived as an answer to denuclearization as it may new problems. China should get off its high horse, and South Korea should not make further excuses for THAAD deployment. China must face the reality of two Koreas and acknowledge South Korea's demand for security. At the same time, the U.S. must not press and push the two Koreas. Cooperation of all countries should aim at producing a solution and not more problems.

IV. Recommendations

The THAAD controversy has become a precarious stone wall for Northeast Asian countries. The "Division of Qin into Three Dynasties" in the late Spring and Autumn period, Poland after two World Wars and the current Ukraine have taught us a cruel lesson: These countries either willingly or were forced to pick a side, and in the end they were all faced with internal division and plunder. Lines that divide often end tragically for citizens and countries alike. Memories remain fresh on the Korean Peninsula. During the late Lee Dynasty, different sects drew China, Russia, and Japan, resulting in 36 years of colonization. Even after its independence, the Soviet and the U.S. intervened and the Peninsula has remained divided ever since.

As the saying goes, "a true man will not stand beside a collapsing wall." South Korea should stay alert toward THAAD and not repeat its past mistake that led to division as both Ukraine and Poland did in the past. Because it is hard to see the bigger picture when one is in it, South Korea must assess this issue from a higher strategic level. As former president Kim Dae-jung said, South Korea must make its own strides toward leadership in Northeast Asia and conditions for attracting four major powers.

In 'Attack by Stratagem' of Sun-Tzu's 'Art of War', it says that "[s]ubduing the enemy without fighting is the best strategy. Therefore the best strategy is to intercept the enemy's strategy and stop their plan. The second best is to block the enemy's diplomacy. The next best is to attack the enemy's army. The worst strategy is to attack the enemy's fortress". THAAD would be among the least preferred strategies of "attacking the army" or "attacking the fortress." A better solution would be to foster a better relationship and improve South Korea-China relations and South-North relations. If South Korea is able to take advantage of these disputes, it can upgrade

"the strategy of attacking fortress" into "the strategy of intercepting the enemy's strategy and of blocking its diplomacy.'' In so doing it will be able to coexist with China and the U.S. while taking advantage of both the best of all strategies.

The most pressing issue in the Korean Peninsula is stability. Only with stability can South Korea be guaranteed economic development and be spared the pressure from a US-China rivalry. South Korea will have more say in Peninsular issues and more cards on the reunification table. But THAAD threatens this potential strategic advantage as it also faces strong opposition from Northeast Asian countries like China and Russia. The THAAD issue has already eclipsed other important tasks such as missile defense, and has become a battlefield for political competition between superpowers. In fact, THAAD has become a political "nuclear weapon" swaying Northeast Asian politics. It has damaged many bilateral relationships between China, U.S., Russia, and South Korea, while further complicating North Korea's nuclear issues and North-South relations. THAAD embodies a unilateral, opportunist approach of "maintaining security with force."

What South Korea needs to do most of all is not persuade China into accepting THAAD deployment, but imagine the post-THAAD controversy of a stable domestic and international situation, how to maintain peace in the Korean Peninsula and nearby regions, the prospect of South Korea as an apt negotiator and agenda-setter, its international leverage, and other worthwhile praises. Needless to say, South Korea's good faith and effort will not go unnoticed or unappreciated by China.

2016.8.23 게재

저작권자 © 제주평화연구원, 무단 전재 및 재배포 금지