

# Does THAAD Pose a Threat to China?

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It has been reported that Chinese Defense Minister Chang Wanquan expressed concerns over the US proposal for installing THAAD in South Korea during the Korea-China Defense Ministers Talks held on February 4. At his regular press conference on February 5, Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hong Lei responded to the question of China's position regarding Washington's plan to deploy its THAAD battery in South Korea by expressing hope that "...countries concerned can properly deal with relevant issues in the larger interests of regional peace and stability and bilateral relations." He further added that "China holds a consistent and clear position on anti-missile issues. It is our belief that every country should keep in mind others' security interests and regional peace and stability while pursuing its own security interests." It has also been reported that Chinese President Xi Jinping directly commented on the issue of a missile defense system in his meeting with South Korean President Park Geun-hye during the summit in Seoul last July, expressing his opposition to the US THAAD deployment out of consideration for state sovereignty. He asserted that if the US were to deploy THAAD in South Korea for the purpose of protecting American troops, South Korea should exercise its right as a sovereign state and express opposition.

As the Korean government has already clearly expressed its dissatisfaction with Beijing's objections to Washington's deployment of THAAD in South Korea, and as some news media speculate that Beijing's opposition stems from possible security concerns, I feel compelled to address some misconceptions of THAAD and of missile defense in general.

The issue of THAAD deployment became a topic of debate after United States Forces Korea (USFK)

Commander General WSharp's nomination hearing in 2008, during which he emphasized that South Korea must develop a systematic missile defense solution including the deployment of THAAD. This was followed by General James Thurman's statement at his nomination hearing in front of the US Senate Armed Services Committee in 2011 regarding the need to deploy THAAD. THAAD deployment became an especially contentious issue after General Curtis Scaparrotti's recommendation to deploy THAAD to South Korea at a national defense forum organized by the Korea Institute for Defense Analyses last June. While some had anticipated that the deployment of THAAD would bring South Korea into the US missile defense system, the debate escalated into a political issue.

In order to clarify what it means to participate or join in the US missile defense system, which is yet to be clearly defined, it is necessary to first examine the strategic and political concepts regarding the US missile defense system. Only then can we determine if the US missile defense system poses a security threat to China and if China should be worried about THAAD a lower-tier missile defense system.

## What should we make of THAAD?

The key phrase in understanding the US missile defense system is "defending the territory of the United States against limited ballistic missile attack." There have been several revisions made upon this initial version, and the purpose of the US missile defense system is now defined as: 1) protecting the US homeland against nuclear weapons, other WMD, or conventional ballistic missile attacks 2) protecting US forces (including military bases, logistics, command and control facilities, and deployed forces) in theaters of operation against ballistic missile attacks armed with WMD and/or conventional munitions 3) protecting US allies, partners against ballistic-missile-delivered WMD and/or conventional weapons and 4) protecting against accidental or unauthorized launch of ballistic missile attacks.

What deserves attention here is that large-scale attacks from Russia and China are not the subjects of US missile defense. A common misconception regarding the US missile defense system is related to its mission that the US missile defense system targets Russia and China. The real objective of the US missile defense system is to counter the estimated 6,300 ballistic missiles outside the control of the US, NATO, Russia, and China.

In fact, the US has neither the intention nor the capability to target Russia or China with its missile defense system. The intention of the US missile defense system has been a topic of debate since its conception. Currently, from a strategic point of view, the US is not considering the establishment of a defense system against ballistic missiles from Russia and China. The US affirms that its

construction of a missile defense system in Europe and Asia will not change the existing strategic balance with Russia and China for the following reasons: First, strategically speaking, the construction of a missile defense system aimed at a powerful nation would lead to a highly costly arms race. If one side were to begin constructing a defense system, the other side would increase its offensive armaments in order to incapacitate the said defense system. Therefore if the US were to direct the construction of such a system at a powerful country, it would face serious consequences. Furthermore, the construction of a missile defense system would change the strategic calculations of the other country and increase the likelihood of war. If a counterattack were staged after a preemptive strike in response to the construction of such a defense system, it would likely be futile if the defense were strong enough. One would thus gain an advantage by attacking first. With mounting strategic distrust between the two sides, a preemptive strike would not bode well for the US.

The US also lacks the capability of establishing a missile defense system aimed at Russia and China. Considering the nuclear capabilities of Russia and of China in terms of nuclear warheads and ballistic missiles, the US would not be able to defend itself effectively from a major attack by either country in the event of such. Suppose, for example, that either Russia or China were to strike US territory with 100 missiles. Even if the technologically advanced US defense system succeeded in intercepting 70 of them, the remaining 30 that reach the US territory would still be sufficient and practically render the US defense meaningless. It should also be noted that failure to shoot down missiles and repeated attempts to shoot down missiles are entirely different circumstances. In addition, a missile defense system comes at an astronomical cost. Building a system to defend against ballistic missiles of powerful nations is like shoveling sand against the tide. The conclusion is therefore that the US must depend on mutual deterrence with Russia and China, as China also considers mutual vulnerability to be the basis of its strategic relationship with the US.

Next, I will discuss why THAAD by itself cannot pose a threat to China. Some Koreans argue that THAAD may be a threat to China because an X-Band radar needed for the THAAD system, specifically the AN/TPY-2 X-Band radar, can be used to track China's movements by identifying long-range missile threats (up to 1,000 kilometers). They therefore consider this to be the purpose of the US proposal to deploy THAAD to South Korea. However, two AN/TPY-2 radars with similar specifications have already been installed in Japan and the UHF long-range EWR based on AN/FPS-115 Pave Paws, known as the world's strongest radar, has been constructed in Taiwan. The radar in Taiwan, which was completed in 2009 after construction began in 2004 with an investment of approximately USD 1.2 billion (currently equivalent to KRW 1.5 trillion), can simultaneously detect 1,000 targets within a 3,000 kilometer radius. Given such radars have already been installed in Japan and in Taiwan, a comparable

if not less potent radar system to be deployed in South Korea should come as neither a surprise nor an alarm.

The argument that the purpose of deploying THAAD to South Korea is to intercept China's missiles therefore lacks empirical basis. THAAD provides the capability to intercept ballistic missiles during their terminal phase of flight in which they re-enter the atmosphere on their way to the target. This means that it does not intercept the boost phase of ballistic missiles or the phase of their flight outside the atmosphere. The US stopped funding the boost phase interception program which it considered impractical. THAAD is a defense system that can only be used against missiles entering South Korean territory.

## Why does China oppose THAAD?

The US ballistic missile defense system is neither intended against China nor capable of being used for that purpose. Why, then, is China still pressuring South Korea to oppose it?

There are two main reasons.

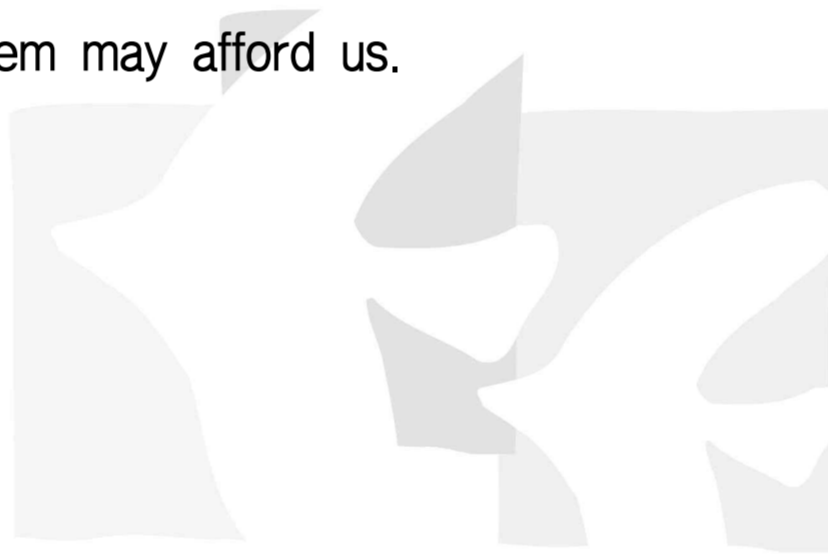
First, considering South Korea's domestic politics and the current situation in Northeast Asia, China likely sees Korea as the weakest link in the US Northeast Asian alliance system which could potentially threaten the system's survival. While the THAAD issue is unlikely to affect ROK-US alliance, China may continue seeing such opportunities as a way of weakening the alliance in the future. To be sure, there are certainly those in Korea that support China's opposition to the THAAD deployment. For China which, unlike the US, has no allies, the weakening of ROK-US relations aligns with its strategic interests. This means that such attempts by China will continue, given that its objective is to test the pressure needed to strain ROK-US alliance.

Second, China seeks to prevent any changes in the current strategic situation on the Korean Peninsula that could result from changes to South Korea's current missile defense system. North Korea's continued development of ballistic missile capabilities and nuclear weapons has put South Korea at a strategic disadvantage. Although South Korea is able to respond to this through the extended deterrence of the US, based on relative missile and nuclear capabilities between the two Koreas North Korea still maintains strategic asymmetry over South Korea. This advantage has allowed North Korea to exercise coercive diplomacy and other provocative acts. Therefore, any changes to South Korea's defense capabilities to deter North Korea's missiles—which would thereby change the strategic situation in the region—is seen as highly undesirable by China.

## How should South Korea respond?

First, we cannot sustain the strategic ambiguity that the deployment of THAAD to South Korea has not been officially negotiated or determined. Rather, we need to strongly assert that China's stance on the matter can be interpreted as siding with North Korea even if that is not what China intends to do.

Second, South Korea should shift from the debate over whether deploying THAAD means participating in the US missile defense system to that over whether THAAD is essential at this stage with respect to South Korea's security, budgetary concerns and, most importantly, North Korea's missile threat. The argument that THAAD is a US missile defense system because it was not originally intended to be part of the existing Korean Air and Missile Defense system (KAMD) should be put aside. Instead, we need to establish missile defense strategies and policies that are adaptable to the ever-changing threats of North Korea's missiles and possible methods of attack which go beyond what this missile defense system may afford us.



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