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Misinformation Hinders Debate on THAAD Deployment in Korea

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Dr. Woo Jung-Yeop and Eileen Block, Director and Assistant Director, respectively, of the Washington, DC office at the Asan Institute for Policy Studies, explain that “Rather than focus only on China’s reactions, South Korean policymakers and the public need to pay more attention to issues of THAAD feasibility and cost.”

South Korea’s domestic debate on the possible deployment of a U.S. Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system has centered on China’s negative reaction, including concerns that the deployment is intended to strengthen the deterrence capability against China as part of the U.S. BMD (ballistic missile defense) system. Rather than focus only on China’s reactions, South Korean policymakers and the public need to pay more attention to issues of THAAD feasibility and cost.

One argument behind China’s opposition to THAAD deployment in South Korea is the AN/TPY-2 X-Band radar needed in the THAAD system. China worries that the radar can be easily converted from a short to long detection range that could track Chinese military movements. 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, was constructed in Taiwan in 2009. Despite the installation of those radars in Japan and Taiwan, China has had a much stronger response to their deployment in South Korea. Over the past months, Chinese officials have repeatedly voiced their concerns and stressed that although the deployment of THAAD is intended to protect the 28,000 American troops, South Korea should exercise its right as a sovereign state and express opposition.

There are two main reasons why China is exerting pressure on South Korea to oppose the deployment of THAAD. First, considering South Korea’s domestic politics and the current situation in Northeast Asia, it is highly possible that China considers Korea as the weakest link among the Northeast Asian allies of the United States and, in this context, believes it could weaken the U.S.-ROK alliance and possibly the wider alliance system. However, it is not likely that preventing THAAD installation would lead to weakening of the ROK-U.S. alliance. Second, China seeks to prevent any change to the current strategic situation on the Korean Peninsula that could result from changes to South Korea’s missile defense system. North Korea’s continued development of ballistic missile capabilities and nuclear weapons has put South Korea at a strategic disadvantage. South Korea is able to respond to this through the U.S. extended deterrence, but in comparisons of the existing military strength on the Korean Peninsula, North Korea can be said to be in an asymmetrically beneficial position due to its missile and nuclear capabilities. Therefore, any change to South Korea’s defense capabilities to deter North Korea’s missiles would change the strategic situation in the region, which is highly undesirable to China.

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However, Beijing’s “over-handedness” on the issue has led to a backlash in South Korea and its behavior is now being interpreted as a form of economic blackmail in order to bully Seoul to choose a side in an attempt to drive a wedge in the U.S.-ROK alliance. The discussion in South Korea is slowly shifting towards the position that THAAD is irrelevant to China’s strategic goals and is only intended for South Korea’s security. Korea’s Defense Ministry spokesman affirmed that “a neighboring country can have its own position about the USFK’s deployment of THAAD, but it should not try to exert influence on our security policies.”

Meanwhile, several key U.S. officials have argued that THAAD is a “purely defensive system” that would improve the ability to intercept short- and medium-range missiles from North Korea and this does not and cannot impact broader strategic stability with Russia or China. The U.S. view is that discussion on THAAD should be centered around North Korea’s growing nuclear and missile capabilities and South Korea’s defense capabilities. U.S. military interest in THAAD is believed to have been strongly provoked by North Korea’s missile tests on March 26, 2014, when it fired two mid-range Rodong missiles that only flew about 650 kilometers before dropping into the East Sea. Since Rodong’s estimated range was 1,000 to 1,500 kilometers, it was believed that those missiles were fired at a higher than usual launch angle. This test alarmed the two allies. In a press conference in Singapore on the sidelines of the Shangri-La Dialogue, U.S. Senator John McCain stated that “the THAAD system is a very effective and excellent deterrent” and “is something that has to be considered in light of recent information about the advanced step North Korea has made.”

South Korea should place greater emphasis not on the dispute over whether deploying THAAD means participating in the U.S. missile defense system or China’s reaction, but rather on the discussion over whether THAAD is essential at this stage with respect to South Korea’s security and budget situation, and most importantly, North Korea’s missile threat. There needs to be a clear explanation on the threat assessment and affordability, and the establishment of missile defense strategies and policies adaptable to varying levels of attack by North Korea and the ever-changing threat of North Korea’s missiles. As Admiral James Winnefeld, vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, mentioned last year, “in a world of declining budgets, it’s likely we’ll come to rely more on those partners to resource the means for their defense, as we work closely together on the ways.” The only channel through which Korea can financially contribute to THAAD installation is the Special Measures Agreement (SMA), which will be renegotiated in 2018. Currently, the total SMA amount is around \$800 million, which cannot cover the estimated cost of delivering even one battery of the THAAD system. Uncertainty about affordability is one reason why misinformation and misinterpretation of the issue has intensified over the past year.

The official positions in both Washington and Seoul are that THAAD is being reviewed separately and there are no official discussions between the two countries. Ultimately, a decision about THAAD deployment will come down to the cost and reliability of the THAAD system. However the limited access to credible information on the system’s costs and feasibility has greatly hindered the public debate in South Korea. At this time, a higher priority should be placed on transparency in order to steer the discussion and decision-making in the right direction.

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