

THAAD and the Changing Geopolitics of Northeast Asia

한국의 사드 배치 문제와 동북아의 지정학적 파장

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Abstract

North Korea has historically used its strategic weapons program as a bargaining chip to be exchanged for economic and political considerations. In recent years, its program has changed character and is currently intended to create a nuclear deterrent—the ultimate insurance against regime change. Because nuclear weapons are also offensive weapons, this change in the strategic purpose of the North Korean program has evoked a response from the United States and its regional allies in South Korea and Japan: the deployment of an anti-ballistic missile system, the Terminal High Altitude Area Defence system (THAAD). This paper examines the complex geopolitical context of North-East Asia within which these significant political and military changes have taken place.

- Key words: Korean geopolitics, THAAD, Korean peninsula, Kim regime, American northeast Asian strategy

초록

북한은 역사적으로 자국의 전략 무기 개발 프로그램을 경제적 이익과 정치적 이익을 획득하기 위한 협상 수단으로 사용했다. 하지만 최근 몇 년 사이에 북한은 전략적 목적을 수정했으며, 이제는 미국이 강제하는 북한 레짐 체인지를 원천적으로 차단할 수 있는 핵억지력을 확보하고자 한다. 그런데 핵무기는 기본적으로 공격무기다. 따라서 북한의 이러한 전략적 목적의 변화는 미국과 미국의 지역 동맹국인 한국과 일본의 전략적 대응을 야기했는데, 한반도에 탄도탄 요격 미사일 체계인 사드를 배치하는 것이 그것이다. 이 논문에서는 이처럼 중요한 정치적, 군사적 변화가 발생하는 동북아의 복잡한 지정학적 상황을 검토하고자 한다.

- 주제어: 한국의 지정학, 사드, 한반도, 김정은 정권, 미국의 동북아시아 전략

I . The Immediate Problem

In January 2017, acting president of the Republic of Korea (ROK) Hwang Kyo-ahn remarked in the course of a press conference that the nuclear weapons program and missile development undertaken by the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), North Korea, constituted "clear existential threats" to his country.¹⁾ Hwang's statement implicitly acknowledged that inducements of money, food, oil and commercial nuclear reactors, which have been offered the DPRK in exchange for that country abandoning its nuclear weapons program, have not worked. Today, and whatever the rest of the world may have thought in the past, North Korean nuclear systems are not bargaining chips to be traded for economic or political concessions from others but capabilities to be demonstrated. This is why North Korea regularly has exploded nuclear devices and tested its missile systems. Three of five nuclear tests have been carried out since Kim Jong-un succeeded his father late in 2011, which suggests an acceleration in its testing cycle.

The development of delivery vehicles and the weaponization of nuclear devices into actual weapons has changed the strategic calculus and the strategic balance in northeast Asia. With North Korea in the closing stages of creating a nuclear deterrent, they have introduced a new element into the mix of their defence strategy. In turn, the United States and its regional allies, Japan and the ROK, are rethinking their own strategic responses. The deployment of Terminal High Altitude Area Defence systems (formerly called Theatre High Altitude Area Defence), THAAD, a United States Army anti-ballistic missile (ABM) system designed to destroy short, medium, and intermediate missiles in their terminal decent phase using a kinetic (not explosive) hit-to-kill method, is part of this strategic change. This paper discusses several of the major elements that the United States and the ROK will consider, or have considered, in their decisions regarding THAAD.

Let us begin by noting that changing a nuclear weapons program that is a bargaining chip into one that is a deterrent, is fundamental. North Korean Nodong

1) Vishaka Sonawane, "China-South Korea War?" *International Business Times*, 23 January, 2017. Available at: <http://www.ibtimes.com/china-south-korea-war-thaad-deployment-should-not-be-postponed-despite-chinese-2479394> (23 January 2017).

missiles are capable of reaching Japan and South Korea. By 2020 or so, it is possible that the KN-08 missile will be operational; it would be able to reach Alaska, Western Canada, the Pacific Northwest of the United States as well as Hawaii. With such a capability, it is evident that the North Korea nuclear program (like that of other nuclear powers) is designed to forestall regime change.²⁾ In that respect, as we argue below, the weapons-as-deterrent strategy continued as well as replaced the weapons-as-bargaining-chip strategy.³⁾

The North Korea rationale is straightforward. For many years, and perhaps for orthodox Marxist reasons, they have emphasized the importance of science, technology and heavy industry. Accomplishments in these areas, especially high-tech rocketry and satellite launchers, serve both to rally the population behind the regime by emphasizing rational pride, and to reinforce the ability of North Korea to resist sanctions by promoting greater independence, self-sufficiency, autarky – or in the North Korean context, *juche*.⁴⁾ Whether one emphasizes the ideological element of *juche* or more commonsensical geopolitical realities, the overriding political goal of the Kim regime in the North is its self-preservation.⁵⁾ Nuclear weapons are an element in that strategy just as THAAD is in part a response to it.

2) See John Schilling, “Where’s that North Korea ICBM Everyone Was Talking About? .38 North 12 March, 2015. Available at: <http://38north.org/2015/03/jschilling031215/print/> (1/27/2017); John Schilling, Jeffrey Lewis and David Schmerler, “A New ICBM for North Korea?” .38 North 22 December, 2015. Available at: <http://38north.org/2015/12/icbm122115/print/> (1/27/2017). The capabilities of North Korea rockets, as is true for much else about the country, are inherently controversial.

3) See Young Whan Kihl and Hong Nack Kim, *North Korea: The Politics of Regime Survival* (Armonk, M.E. Sharpe, 2006).

4) See: Charles K. Armstrong, “Familism, Socialism and Political Religion in North Korea,” *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions* 6 (2005), 383–94; Phillip Hookon Park, *Self-Reliance or Self-Destruction? Success or Failure of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea’s Development Strategy of Self-Reliance, “Juche,”* (London, Routledge, 2002); B.R. Myers “Western Academia and the Word *Juche*,” *Pacific Affairs* 87 (2014), 779–89.

5) See Gi-wook Shin, *Ethnic Nationalism in Korea: Genealogy Politics and Legacy* (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2006).

II. The Larger Context

Despite sharing the same peninsula, the geopolitics of North and South Korea are significantly distinct. The South developed historically as a series of coastal settlements with little agricultural land and few natural resources. Of necessity, the southerners were traders, but traders where their neighbours, Japan and China, were far larger. Hence, the poignancy of the Korean proverb that the position of their country is akin to a shrimp swimming between two whales.

Historically, the Japanese navy, in effect, ensured that any Korean navy would be little more than a coast guard. In contrast, the North was more oriented towards the Asian continent, chiefly China, and was the geographical centre of heavy-industry development on the peninsula. Instead of looking outward in the hopes of trade, the North sought to isolate itself as much as possible in order to keep foreigners from exercising control. After the Pacific War ended, the North continued this tradition and the South sought a foreign partner, in this instance the United States, to protect it from the two whales. The US Navy secured the maritime approaches to the South and America provided both investment and a market for their manufactured products. This was essentially the same policy the United States followed with respect to postwar Japan.

Initially, American strategy in the Western Pacific did not pay much attention to Korea. The overriding focus was to secure offshore islands from the Aleutians through Japan and Taiwan south into the Philippines and Indonesia. These unsinkable aircraft carriers along with the Seventh Fleet, homeport Yokosuka, Japan, were considered sufficient to contain both the Soviet Union and the communist Chinese.⁶ In 1945, the Korean peninsula was divided into two zones, the North controlled by communists under orders from Stalin and led by Kim Il-sung, the South under Syngman Rhee and supported by American occupation forces. The

6) See John L. Gaddis, *The United States and the Origins of the Cold War* (NY, Columbia University Press, 1972); John L. Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of Postwar American National Security Policy* (NY, Oxford University Press, 1982); John L. Gaddis, *The Cold War: A New History* (NY, Penguin, 2005); see also, Sergei N. Goncharov, John W. Lewis, and Xue Litai, *Uncertain Partners: Stalin, Mao and the Korean War* (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1995).

Red Army withdrew to the Soviet Union in 1948 and the Americans withdrew to Japan in 1949.

In 1950, when Kim invaded the South, the Americans abandoned the strategy of avoiding land operations on the Asian mainland. Despite continuing debates over motives, it seems clear that Kim's aspirations to unite the peninsula by force exceeded his capabilities and that the leadership of Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China underestimated the willingness of the United States to move away from its preferred strategy and to intervene on land. The initial problems faced by the South Koreans, the Americans, and the United Nations troops, the landing at Inchon and drive to the Yalu River, followed by Chinese intervention and the ultimate stalemate approximately along the former border, constitute a well-known and well-studied history. The current DMZ and the armistice agreement are still in place and a significant number of American forces remain in the South.

During the Cold War, the presence of American troops in the ROK was intelligible in terms of maintaining the status quo. Apart from North Korea, no one was interested in changing the de facto border: The Soviet Union was more concerned with its Western exposure to NATO; The Americans were concerned that the collapse of the DPRK would destabilize the South a lead to a confrontation with China; The ROK was unwilling to act against the North, because Seoul was in range of their artillery; For the Chinese, both during the Cold War and during the 1990s, Korea remained a buffer between Manchuria and potential hostiles. After 1991, the reasons for the continued stationing of United States forces in the South became more complex and brought into focus the strategic problem faced by North Korea.

In terms of global American strategy, let alone American interests in the Western Pacific, the presence of United States troops in South Korea is something of an anomaly. Why are they there when the US Navy, not ground troops, provides the most important aspect of power projection in the region? Of course, bureaucratic inertia has always played a part, as does the possibility that the North might interpret an American withdrawal from the peninsula as an invitation to move south. There are other factors to consider as well. To begin with, for their part, the North Koreans may well have welcomed American troops in the South as a

means of controlling forceful unification from that direction. And Japan would not have unambiguously welcomed unification of the peninsula from the south either, because a unified Korea might easily result in a robust, competitive and nearby economic power of some 70 million people.

More interesting for the purposes of this paper is the argument that North Korea developed a strategy for survival under post-Cold War conditions that George Friedman, founder of STRATFOR, called “Ferocious, Weak and Crazy.”⁷⁾ North Korea’s chief problem with the collapse of the Soviet Union was that it lost an economic and political patron. Many observers thought that North Korea would go the way of the Soviet Union and that outside powers would intervene. Whether it was China or the United States did not much matter to the PDRK leadership: regime change from whatever direction was to be avoided.

The “ferocious-weak-crazy” strategy was designed to ensure the continuity of the Kim regime. Ferocity was expressed initially in the aforementioned artillery and barrage rocket capability: the point was not to engulf Seoul in a “sea of fire,” as the North threatened to do often enough, but to have the ability to do so. Second, the stress on weakness sent the message that there was no point in subverting the North: it would collapse soon enough on its own. This is why the North allowed carefully chosen western reporters to see evidence of North Korean famine during the 1990s. Combining the two led western analysts to debate whether its ferocity was more important than its weakness. The result was endless analysis and no action. Third, the North portrayed themselves as entirely unpredictable, and given to uttering belligerent threats. They seemed to invite war and occasionally confirmed their “craziness” by taking unprovoked, and unexpected aggressive actions.⁸⁾ Of course, speculation regarding the motives of the DPRK leadership

7) See Friedman, “Ferocious Weak and Crazy: The North Korean Strategy,” *Geopolitical Weekly* (24 December, 2013). Available at: <https://www.stratfor.com/weekly/ferocious-weak-and-crazy-north-korean-strategy> (17 January 2017).

8) According to the multinational Joint Investigation Group, on 26 March, 2010 the ROK frigate *Cheonan* was sunk by a shockwave from the explosion of a North Korean torpedo sufficient to split her hull. The event took place near Baengnyong Island, close the Northern Limit Line, a contested border between the two countries. The North and its allies denied the allegation and the scientific evidence was mixed. See David Cyranoski, “Controversy over South Korea’s Sunken Ship” *Nature*, 8 July 2010, (doi: 10.1038/news.2010.343); “Questions Raised over Korean

was all over the map; the outcome, however, helped ensure that the rest of the world left them alone.

Of the three elements in this strategy the most difficult to maintain was the imagery of ferocious power. The nuclear program was initially designed for this effect, as was the missile program. The purpose, as with the threat of artillery to Seoul, was not to develop nuclear weapons and delivery systems, let alone use them, but to be on the verge of doing so. This was a necessary, if peculiar, element to the North Korean strategy. Any rational actor in Pyongyang, possessing only a few nuclear weapons, would not use them against the South or Japan because the American response would annihilate the country and the regime.⁹⁾ However, if the Kim regime were considered irrational –crazy– it might work. So long as the US and its regional allies thought the DPRK leadership were irrational, and that the North might rush a weapon into production and then use it, they would treat them with great circumspection. In particular, there would be neither talk about, nor action aimed at, regime change.

For about two decades following the end of the Cold War the strategy has worked. An additional benefit to the North was that it secured the attention of much larger powers on its own terms. Absent its nuclear programs, the geopolitical heft of North Korea is comparable to Ethiopia or Kyrgyzstan. With nuclear weapons, the North was able to exact concessions from the South, Japan, and the United States and treat these much larger countries, along with Russia and China, as peers. The effect on the internal politics of North Korea was obvious: the stability and legitimacy of the Kim regime was enhanced along with the hostility of its neighbours, which in turn reinforced the importance of the policies of the regime as a needed defence against external threats. Looked at simply in terms of *Realpolitik*, the achievement of the Kim regime was remarkably successful.

This North Korea strategy (perhaps incidentally, perhaps not) also created a major beneficiary: China. For China, the North was more than a buffer against other

Torpedo Claims,” *Nature* 14 July 2010 (doi: 10.1038/4663026) (1/25/2017). Ten months later North Korea shelled the island of Yeonpyeong opening the first artillery battle between the two since the 1970s.

9) The new American Secretary of Defense, James Mattis, made the US commitment abundantly clear on his first overseas trip, a four-day visit to Japan and South Korea in early February, 2017.

countries; it also provided the Chinese with an opportunity to act as an intermediary between the North and its adversaries. Because of American and Japanese sensitivity to weapons of mass destruction and especially to nuclear weapons, whenever the North Koreans did something particularly offensive or outrageous, the US would request China to intervene and demonstrate its responsibility as a major regional and global power by persuading the North not to do anything stupid. This response by the Chinese was not difficult for them, since the purpose of the North Korean strategy was not, in any event, to do anything but only to be capable of doing something – indeed, anything. That is, because China did not need actually to undertake any action with respect to North Korea, it cost them nothing to make a verbal intercession. They would, however, gain the gratitude of the Americans and their allies, which had the consequence of making it more difficult for them to press China on other matters. To the extent that diplomacy is a way of promoting national interests without going to war, North Korea was a major diplomatic asset for China.

One conclusion from this analysis seems clear: American troops in South Korea remain in place at least in part as a response to the North Korea strategy. Their presence may not serve global American strategic interests particularly well, but it does serve the interests of China, South Korea and Japan; and it also serves the interests of North Korea by helping justify the continued existence of the Kim regime. A second conclusion is that the “ferocious-weak-crazy” strategy took the form of an endless bargaining process. North Korea would pretend to reduce its nuclear program in exchange for material or diplomatic concessions but then ramp it up again to gain additional concessions. But no strategy works forever. The Americans were fully aware of the pattern of North Korea behaviour, and the North was, as noted above, fully aware of American concerns with weapons of mass destruction. Around the time of the deaths of Muammar Gaddafi and Kim Jong-Il in 2011, the North began to abandon the option of trading on the fears of its nuclear weapons program.

III. New Options

For two decades, North Korea followed the ferocious-weak-irrational strategy in a highly rational way. It never crossed whatever notional line existed – such as deploying a nuclear weapon on a launcher – that would compel a response from its neighbours or from the United States. Indeed, from the perspective of North Korea, and keeping in mind the overriding political objective, namely to preserve the Kim regime, the Americans after the terrorist attack of September 11, 2001 are the ones who looked to be irrational. Consider the following argument.

Following the 2001 terrorist attack on the United States, the North Koreans reduced the intensity of their rhetoric and appeared to offer concessions to the Americans and their allies. In his State of the Union speech, delivered in January, 2002, however, President George W. Bush described North Korea as “a regime arming with missiles and weapons of mass destruction, while starving its citizens” and described the regime, along with those governing Iran, and especially the government of Iraq, as constituting “an axis of evil, arming to threaten the peace of the world.”¹⁰ After having linked North Korea to Iraq and invading the latter country a little over a year later, ostensibly on the grounds that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction, the DPRK leadership reconsidered their security strategy. Specifically, the capability of inflicting severe artillery and rocket damage on Seoul was no longer considered a sufficient deterrent for foreign military intervention, particularly by the US.

The North Koreans continued to negotiate with the American during the early 2000s, but in 2006 they exploded their first nuclear device and seemed to continue the earlier strategy only now with much more destructive munitions. In 2009, they exploded a second device and in 2010 announced the existence of a heretofore-secret nuclear weapons facility. Two years later, they announced they would suspend nuclear testing. This period, from 2006 to 2012, looked to be a continuation of the bargaining strategy of an earlier day.

At the same time, however, the fate of Saddam Hussein, and then of Muammar Gaddafi, must have given the North Korea leadership a great deal to ponder. In

10) Available at: <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2002/01/20020129-11.html> (24 Jan. 2017).

late 2003, after seeing what the Americans did in Iraq, Gaddafi agreed to give up his own weapons of mass destruction program, including his efforts at nuclear weapons development. Relations between Libya and the US improved for a time, but he was dead and his regime was destroyed a few years later. The North Koreans drew the obvious conclusion: diplomatic moves without a genuine deterrent cannot forestall destabilization and regime change. Indeed, the death of Kim Jong-il a few months after Gaddafi and his succession by a young Kim Jong-un was followed by a significant change in North Korea strategy. On the one hand, giving up weapons of mass destruction in exchange for political and economic benefits was highly uncertain: the Gaddafi example indicated to the Kim regime that the Americans and other members of the international community were not to be trusted. On the other hand, the example of Pakistan provided the North Koreans with a positive example. That country has maintained its independence despite the much greater military capability of India, in some measure because of its nuclear weapons.

Since about 2011, Rodger Baker has argued, North Korea “has unequivocally rejected the idea of trading away its nuclear weapons program.”¹¹⁾ Sunk costs are one reason the North Korean leadership changed direction, but more important, by this argument was the realization that threatening the South or Japan might be insufficient to deter American action. This consideration looked at from the perspective of North Korea, raises new questions: how likely is an American pre-emptive strike at the North? And what would it look like? There seem to be two possibilities. The first is a small attack aimed at North Korean nuclear facilities. Such an operation holds open the possibility that in conducting it the US would not be concerned with regime change. Whether North Korea would see it that way is questionable. What is unquestionable is that a more comprehensive strike would be, and would be seen to be, an effort at regime change. This kind of strike would add to the nuclear targets of the smaller and more focussed strike, conventional command-and-control targets, North Korean leadership, military units and so on. Unlike the first option, the larger one requires plenty of planning and staging, which are hard to hide, and which, therefore, would signal to North Korea what was coming. Such action by the US and its allies would likely trigger a

11) See his “Facing North Korea’s Nuclear Reality,” available at: <https://www.stratfor.com/weekly/facing-north-koreas-nuclear-reality> (17 January, 2017).

pre-emptive strike by the North. Moreover, even if a more modest and undetected strike-force could be accumulated in Japan and the ROK, there seems to be insufficient intelligence on the location of North Korea facilities to ensure their destruction by such a surgical strike. Looked at from the safety of North America, even a limited attack by the US, with or without its regional allies, seems a remote possibility. Viewed from Pyongyang, such a possibility is an existential threat.

This is why, starting in 2014 or so, the North has increased the tempo of its nuclear testing and, more importantly, has accelerated the development of its medium- and long-range missiles.¹²⁾ Accordingly, in his 2017 New Year's address, Kim Jong-un claimed that North Korea had "entered the trial stage of preparation for the test launch of an intercontinental ballistic missile," presumably its KN-08 or KN-14 systems.¹³⁾ Despite occasional hints that the Kim regime has not entirely abandoned its bargaining strategy, the consensus among North Korea specialists is that their nuclear program is a major element in their national security policy and thus subject to the logic of deterrence initially developed during the Cold War.¹⁴⁾ This change in North Korea strategy has begun to shape the response of the US and its regional allies. If attempting to prevent North Korea from ob-

12) See Anna Fifield, "Did North Korea Just Test Missiles Capable of Hitting the US? Maybe." *Washington Post* 26 October, 2016. Available at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/did-north-korea-just-test-missiles-capable-of-hitting-the-us-maybe/2016/10/26/984e8a21-e6a7-4689-81e0-21d7d25c302f_story.html (25 January 2017). See also: John Schilling, "Musudan Could be Operational Sooner than Expected" .38 *North*, 17 October, 2016. Available at: <http://38north.org/2016/10/jschilling101716/print> (26 January, 2017). Musudan, named after the town Musudan-ri where North Korea missile engineers live and work, is called by the North Koreans "Hwasong-10."

13) See Ankit Panda, "2017: Year of North Korean Intercontinental Ballistic Missile?" *The Diplomat* 3 January, 2017. Available at: <http://thediplomat.com/2017/01/2017-year-of-the-north-korean-intercontinental-ballistic-missile/> (25 January 2017). See also C.P.Vick, "North Korean Hwasong-13, KN-14" *Global Security*. Available at: <http://www.globalsecurity.org/wmd/world/dprk/kn-14.htm> (26 January, 2017).

14) See the discussion in Barry Cooper, "Raymond Aron and Nuclear War," *Journal of Classical Sociology*, 11 (2011), 203-24. See also: Reuben Steff and Nicholas Khoo, "Hard balancing in the Age of American Unipolarity: the Russian Response to US Ballistic Missile Defense During the Bush Administration, (2001-2008)," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 37:2 (2014): 222-58; Emanuele Scimia "Can China and Russia Counter the US THAAD in South Korea?" *Asia Times* 18 January, 2017. Available at: <http://www.atimes.com/can-china-russia-counter-us-thaad-south-korea/> (1/23/2017).

taining nuclear weapons is no longer possible, and if an American pre-emptive strike at the country is deemed too dangerous, the question now is: what is the best way for the US, China, Japan, and the ROK to help manage international relations in northeast Asia once North Korea has intermediate and then long-range nuclear weapons?

There are two obvious diplomatic actions available. At the time of writing, early 2017, neither has been undertaken. The first is to acknowledge the new reality: namely that preventing the North from obtaining deliverable nuclear weapons in the near to medium term is unlikely. The second is to establish direct communication between the US and its allies with Pyongyang. Neither action would constitute approval of the North Korea regime or its nuclear policy, so much as reduce the likelihood of misunderstanding and miscalculation.

Instead, and with a minimum of controversy considering the extent of the change, the US and its regional allies have begun to reconfigure the regional security architecture. Japan has already undertaken several significant changes.¹⁵⁾ The South Korean options, at least in the medium term, appear to be two. The first is to rearm the ROK with tactical American nuclear weapons. President George H.W. Bush ordered their withdrawal in 1991 at the end of the Cold War. Prior to that US action, which was balanced by a similar action by the Soviets, North Korea was constantly criticizing their presence in the south. That fact alone indicates that they might serve as the basis for negotiation, providing the North was interested in bargaining. The argument made in this paper is that North Korea is, for the near future, not interested in negotiation, which leaves only the option of an antiballistic missile defence of South Korea and Japan. This option has the decided advantage, at least on the surface and with respect to North Korea, of being defensive: its objective is to destroy any North Korea missile launched towards North America or towards American regional allies.

15) See Barry Cooper, *The Evolution of Japanese Security Policy* (Calgary, CGAI, 2016).

IV. The Complexities of THAAD

A month or so after North Korea conducted its fourth nuclear test and test fired an intermediate range missile, early in 2016, the US and South Korea opened negotiations on the deployment of a THAAD interception system in South Korea. In July 2016, in a joint statement, the ROK and the US announced that THAAD would be deployed in South Korea as a defensive measure against the “evolving threat posed by North Korea.” The concluding paragraph in this joint statement emphasized that THAAD “will be focused solely on North Korea nuclear and missile threats and would not be directed towards any third-party nations,” namely China and Russia.¹⁶⁾ If the deployment goes ahead on schedule, it will be in place by July 2017. The date is subject to revision because of significant opposition to THAAD in South Korea, as well as owing to delays regarding the actual location of the battery and radar.¹⁷⁾ There are also technical questions regarding the reliability and efficiency of THAAD.¹⁸⁾ More interesting for our purposes are the po-

16) USFK/PAO, “ROK and the US Joint Statement: ROK-US Alliance Agrees to Deploy THAAD,” 07 July, 2016. Available at: <http://www.usfk.mil/Media/News/Article/831175/rok-us-joint-statement-rok-us-alliance-agrees-to-deploy-thaad/> (1/27/2017). See also Jack Kim, “South Korea, US to Deploy THAAD Missile Defense, Drawing China Rebuke,” *Reuters* 08 July, 2016. Available at: <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-southkorea-usa-thaad-idUSKCN0ZO084> (1/15/2017). See also Ian E. Rinchart, Steven A. Hildreth and Susan V. Lawrence, *Ballistic Missile Defence in the Asia-Pacific Region: Cooperation and Opposition*, (Washington, Congressional Research Service, 03 April, 2015), 4.

17) See Elizabeth Shim, “US, South Korea to Deploy THAAD by July, Report Says,” 20 January 2017. Available at: http://www.upi.com/Top_News/World-News/2017/01/20/US-South-Korea-to-deploy-THAAD-by-July-report-says/8251484921434/print (1/23/2017); Katharine H.S. Moon and Andrew I. Yeo, “Democratic Deficit and Missile Defense in South Korea,” *The Diplomat* 04 August, 2016. Available at: <http://thediplomat.com/2016/08/democratic-deficit-and-missile-defense-in-south-korea/> (1/23/2017).

18) These are discussed in detail by Tim Beal “The Deployment of THAAD in Korea and the struggle over US Global Hegemony,” *Journal of Political Criticism* 19 (2016), 30–36, and will not be rehearsed here. See also the early report US Department of Defense, Report to Congress on Theatre Missile Defense Architecture Options for the Asia-Pacific Region, 4 May 1999. Available at: <http://www.dod.gov/pubs/tmd050499.pdf> (1/25/2017), and Christopher P. Twomey and Michael S. Chase, “Chinese Attitudes Towards Missile Defense,” in Catherine McArdle Kelleher and Peter Dombrowski, eds., *Regional Missile Defense from a Global Perspective* (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2015) 174–206. See also Reuters, “South Korea: No

litical objections, mainly from China.

The actual Chinese response to the THAAD announcement was to ban South Korean pop music stars and cosmetics from China, to reduce the number of South Korean charter airlines flying to China, and to limit the number of Chinese tourists visiting South Korea.¹⁹⁾ Their real objections, however, are strategic. Here, too, matters are complex.

American policy is to maintain “strategic stability” with Russia and China regarding nuclear weapons.²⁰⁾ The argument, a legacy of the Cold War, is that deterrence depends on parity. Russia and China have argued that parity is inherently jeopardized by antiballistic missile systems whether in Europe (Russia’s chief concern) or the Asia-Pacific (China’s chief concern). The general argument is well known: antiballistic missile systems are part of a strategy that aims not at nuclear parity but at nuclear primacy.²¹⁾ Of course, the deployment of ABM systems at Vandenberg Air Force Base in California and Fort Greeley, Alaska, could be overwhelmed by nuclear salvos from Russia or China (with or without decoys). It does not, however, follow that such ABM systems would be useful only against “rogue” states such as Iran and North Korea. Rather, the argument goes, antiballistic missile systems are to be understood not as part of a defensive strategy at all, but as an element in an offensive one, namely as part of a first-strike option. “If the United States launched a nuclear attack against Russia (or China),” Lieber and Press argue, “the targeted country would be left with a tiny surviving arsenal – if any at all. At that point, even a relatively modest or inefficient missile-defense system might well be enough to protect against any retaliatory strikes, because the devastated

Delay for THAAD Missile Deployment, Despite Beijing’s Objections,” *South China Morning Post*, 23 January 2017. Available at: <http://www.scmp.com/news/asia/east-asia/article/2064581/south-korea-no-delay-thaad-missile-deployment-despite-beijings> (1/27/2017).

19) See AFP, “South Korea’s Acting President urges ‘swift’ THAAD Deployment,” 23 January, 2017. Available at: <http://economicstimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/south-koreas-acting-president-urges-swift-thaad-deployment/articleshow/56734760.cms> (01/27/2017).

20) See Department of Defense, Nuclear Posture Review Report, April 2010, x-xi; 4-5; 28-9. Available at: https://www.defense.gov/Portals/1/features/defenseReviews/NPR/2010_Nuclear_Posture_Review_Report.pdf (01/07/2017). See also Robert M. Gates, Ballistic Missile Defense Review Report (Washington, Department of Defense, February 2010).

21) Keir A. Lieber and Daryl G. Press, “The Rise of US Nuclear Primacy,” *Foreign Affairs* 85:2 (2006), 42-54.

enemy would have so few warheads and decoys left.”²²⁾ As with all discussions of nuclear war, the focus is not on American (or Chinese or Russian) intentions, but on capabilities.

The specific argument raised by China is a variation of this more general one.²³⁾ It is centred on the Army/Navy Transportable Radar Surveillance (AN/TPY-2), a high-resolution X-band radar system designed to track both the boost phase of a ballistic missile in a “forward-based” mode and to track the terminal phase of a missile in connection with THAAD fire support. On its terminal mode setting, AN/TPY-2 is relatively short range (around 500 to 600km) whereas forward-based mode reaches out to around 3000km. China’s objection is that on forward-based mode, the radar could monitor Chinese airspace, which the Chinese consider to be spying.²⁴⁾ The Americans responded that it would be used only on terminal mode because it was directed only at North Korea and that if it were set on forward based mode it could not do this.²⁵⁾ It takes several hours to change from one mode to the other, but since the Americans will be operating the radar, if they wished to monitor Chinese airspace, even at the cost of eliminating coverage of North Korea, they could do so and only they would know. Within the logic of deterrence, the Chinese have a good point.

China, like other major nuclear powers, strives to ensure it has a second-strike capacity. This is the foundation of deterrence. In general, as argued above, the deployment of THAAD has the obvious implication that it would degrade Chinese second-strike capability, even if THAAD were simply a defensive system. The

22) Lieber and Press, “The Rise of US Nuclear Primacy,” 52.

23) See Yu Bin, “Russia-China Relations: H-Bomb Plus THAAD Equals Sino-Russian Alliance,” *Comparative Connections* 18:1 (2016), 133–44. Available at: https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/1601qchina_russia_0.pdf (01/23/2017); Sangtae Park, “PacNet #32: how China sees THAAD,” *Centre for strategic and International Studies* 30 March, 2016. Available at: <https://www.csis.org/analysis/pacnet-32-how-china-sees-thaad> (01/23/2017); Scott Snyder and See-won Byun, “China-Korea Relations: Relations in ‘Kim Jong Un’s Era,’” *Comparative Connections*, 18:2 (2016) 93–104. Available at: https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy_files/files/publication/1503qchina_korea.pdf (1/23/2017).

24) See “US can monitor Nearly Half of China if THAAD Enters Korea,” *Chinascopes* 80(2016), 30. Available at: <http://connection.ebscohost.com/c/articles/116993846/expert-u-s-can-monitor-nearly-half-china-if-thaad-enters-korea>

25) See Rinchart *et al.*, *Ballistic Missile Defense in the Asia-Pacific Region* 10–11 and references.

Chinese adhered this same logic to when they objected to American maritime surveillance in the South China Sea. The purpose of that surveillance was to obtain more accurate charts of the area to enhance the anti-submarine capability of the United States Navy. Since submarine launched ballistic missiles are a key element in Chinese second-strike capability, enhanced United States Navy anti-submarine capability also degrades Chinese second-strike effectiveness.

That particular Chinese argument, however, is more a technical than a political one. The South Koreans have often pointed out to the Chinese that they became interested in THAAD, including the dual-use AN/TPY-2 radar, only because China had been unwilling or unable to influence the behaviour of the Kim regime e.²⁶⁾ For China, however, although North Korea remains a strategic buffer as much against the US as against Japan, the policies of North Korea do not always align with the interests of China, even though China's chief interest is ensuring that North Korea remains relatively stable. If stability requires ignoring the North Korean nuclear program, as evidently it does, China is not about to put pressure on North Korea to change anything, particularly when the alternative looks, to China, to be the collapse of the Pyongyang regime.

That would be, for China a catastrophe for several reasons. First, a power vacuum on China's northeast border looks, to them, like an opportunity for American or Japanese action against China. Second, China has been reluctant to intervene in North Korea from a concern that any intervention would destabilize the country leading to a refugee crisis along their common border and to the possibility that migrating refugees would bring North Korea arms with them into china. Third, China has a vital national interest in preventing unification of the peninsula since they think it would entail the domination of North Korea by the ROK owing to the greater economic, political and military strength. That means South Korea would dominate Korean foreign policy, which is unlikely to be sufficiently favourable towards China.

26) See Robert E. Kelly, "Why THAAD in South Korea is a Red Line for China," *The National Interest*, 18 January, 2017. Available at: <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/why-thaad-south-korea-red-line-china-19098> (01/23/2017); Gordon G. Chang, "Here's How China Will Test Trump with North Korean Nukes," *The Daily Beast* 19, January, 2017. Available at: <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2017/01/20/here-s-how-china-will-test-trump-with-north-korean-nukes.html> (01/23/2017).

On the other hand, the increased hostility of North Korea to its neighbours and its nuclear program has exacted its own costs on China. Specifically, a nuclear armed and belligerent North Korea is less likely than ever to listen to the restraining voice of Beijing. The result is that what was once a source of diplomatic and political leverage for China, vis-à-vis the US, Japan and South Korea, namely its “influence” on North Korea, has declined precipitously insofar as North Korea no longer pays much attention even to China. As a result, matters have become even more complex and uncertain. Because the option of military operations against North Korea are not credible, the US and its allies have relied on sanctions. To the extent they have been successful, they have increasingly destabilized the North Korean regime, which, as noted, is a nightmare for Beijing. As a result, China is increasingly at odds with its regional neighbours and the US. This is another reason why the US and its regional allies have assumed a more confrontational stance regarding North Korea, of which THAAD is a major component. The consequence for China is to add to the instability and precarious security environment that the North Korea nuclear weapons program has already introduced.

If that were not a difficult enough situation for the Chinese, things could always get worse. The path North Korea is on to acquire nuclear weapons also provides Japan and South Korea with incentives to reconsider their own military posture, including the acquisition of nuclear weapons. The dangers of proliferation aside, whether such a development would lead China to change its position with respect to North Korea is unknown. It would, however, give the Chinese reasons to consider new options, including the removal of the Kim regime, notwithstanding the enormous difficulties and risks that such an action would bring with it. If Chinese interests in North Korea are more geopolitical than ideological, as we believe they are, then Chinese interests would be served at least as well, and perhaps better, with a more cooperative regime in the North. North Korean leaders are fully aware of Chinese national interests and the degree to which they diverge from their own, and have, on occasion, remarked in the state-controlled media that the promises of big powers such as China are not always reliable, which provides the North Koreans with yet another reason to build up their own deterrent.

Rifts or, more cautiously, potential rifts, between North Korea and its chief

ally, China, are balanced with similar tensions in the South. After the February 2013 nuclear test, South Korea published its Active Deterrence policy, which provided for a South Korean pre-emptive attack on the North if that country indicated it was preparing a nuclear attack on the South. In 2014, South Korea defence ministry unveiled a Proactive Deterrence plan, which shortened South Korean response time to threats from North Korea by compressing the chain of command, and enabling senior commanders to order front-line response units directly into action if a North Korea assault were detected. After the September 2016 test, South Korea issued the Korea Massive Punishment and Retaliation Plan, which amounts to a decapitation strike against North Korean leaders.

At the same time, South Korea has given credibility to these doctrinal changes by acquiring the necessary equipment to operationalize them. Initially the US was reluctant to support South Korean assertiveness, but as the North Korean nuclear arsenal has grown more credible, the Americans supported the South Korean pro-active approach by supplying them with increasingly long-range missiles. South Korea then added cruise missiles to its arsenal. In other words, the ROK will soon have the capabilities of launching a pre-emptive strike on the entire North Korea territory.²⁷⁾

To do so, however, the ROK needs reliable intelligence, specifically the ability to determine if North Korea is indeed preparing to attack the South. In December 2014, the US sold the ROK four RQ-4 Global Hawk surveillance drones. Along with existing ROK satellites, the South has the ability to conduct more or less reliable surveillance over the North. The ROK has also agreed to purchase 40 F-35 stealth fighters with delivery to begin in 2018. That is, the ROK is attempting to counter the nuclear threat from North Korea as quickly as the North is developing it. On the one hand, this South Korean policy is clear evidence that the ROK is now a military partner with the US rather than just the staging area for forward American military bases. The risk of independence however, is that it raises the chances of conflict on the peninsula and thus increases political instability in the region. With the Korea Massive

27) See Anthony H. Cordesman *et al.*, *The Korean Military Balance* (Washington, CSIS, 2011). See also AFP, "S. Korea Warns of Pre-emptive Strike against North over Nuclear Tests." Available at: <https://www.rt.com/news/south-korea-first-strike-806/>

Punishment and Retaliation plan, for example, the time-lines are short. After ROK military leaders received credible intelligence regarding an attack from the North, they would have to decide on whether to launch a pre-emptive strike within a few minutes. Given the secrecy of the North Korean regime, as well as the rhetoric used by North Korean leaders regarding their nuclear program, it would seem to be relatively easy for South Korea to misinterpret innocent North Korean actions as posing an actual threat.

In the face of the long-standing desire of the ROK to be less dependent on the US for defence, the Americans have urged South Korea to develop closer defence ties with Japan, an obvious force-multiplier, from the American perspective, against China as well as the North.²⁸⁾ Many South Koreans oppose cooperating with Japan because of what are called “historical problems.”²⁹⁾ Such cooperation as Japan and South Korea have undertaken have been at least in part a response to China. In addition, however, the incentives for Japan, South Korea and China to cooperate are obvious. China realizes that its own ambitions may be made more difficult to actualize if Japan and South Korea form a coalition against it. Tripartite communications as with the December 2016 Tokyo Summit, are useful in clarifying the aims of China in the region, avoiding accidental confrontations and so on. Japan and South Korea would also benefit by ensuring the maritime approaches through the South and East China Seas are not contested. And that leaves North Korea still on the outside looking in, which enhances the future place of South Korea as the lynchpin between Japan and China and also as a vector between China and Japan with respect to North Korea.

28) See Vice Admiral Ho-sub Jung, “ROK US-Japan Naval Cooperation in the Korean Peninsula Area: Prospects for Multilateral Security Cooperation,” *International Journal of Korean Studies* 16 (2012), 200.

29) See Ji Young Kim, “Rethinking the Role of Identity Factors: The History Problem and the Japan-South Korea Security Relationship in the Post-Cold War Period,” *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* (2015) doi: 10.1093/irap/lcv007.

V. Conclusions

The deployment of THAAD to South Korea was a joint response by the US and the ROK to the North Korean nuclear program. As with all such significant actions, it has introduced new problems requiring additional responses. The THAAD initiative has not, however, erased the long-standing fault lines still dividing the major players in northeast Asia. These divisions are unlikely to disappear in the near future.

The problem for South Korea is that China, which has long objected to THAAD, is its greatest trading partner whereas the US is its major security partner. And since China is also North Korea's greatest trading partner, China is in a unique position to assist South Korea in its dealing with North Korea. But it hasn't done so yet, which underlines the strategic position of the ROK at the centre of northeast Asia. Its importance is a result of geography, first, but also of its economic strength and military power. The ROK, in short, remains in a position to help shape regional geopolitical events through its own choices and actions. None of the major non-Korean actors – China, Japan and the US – can dictate the behaviour of the ROK and for its part, the ROK is in a position to ensure its own autonomy by balancing its relations among the big three. It has done so by maintaining good economic relations with China, by working with Japan to deal with historical grievances, and by cooperating with the US on deploying THAAD. Pessimists might conclude that the THAAD problem is just another manifestation of the South Korean foreign policy dilemma only now there are three whales, not just two. Optimists might see the deployment of THAAD and the constellation of changes it brings with it as having provided South Korea with opportunities to assert its independence.

As far as the Americans are concerned, THAAD reconfirms their commitment to defend South Korea. To the extent that it remains in the context of the Korean peninsula a defensive system, it provides a brake on the otherwise nearly automatic escalator to direct general conflict between North and South. Moreover, the Chinese might take some comfort in knowing that THAAD has for the time being forestalled South Korea from developing its own version, or undertaking its own deterrent actions that would introduce even more instability into northeast Asia.

Finally, it may not be overly optimistic to note that the deployment of THAAD has created further opportunities for innovation and creativity: an implicit alliance or diplomatic understanding between China and the US or Japan and South Korea is entirely possible, however unlikely such a development might have seemed a decade ago.

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