

# Offensive Defensiveness: Classical Chinese Strategy and the THAAD Dispute of 2016

## 공격적 방어주의: 중국의 전통적 군사전략과 2016년 한국의 사드 배치 논쟁

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### Abstract

The People's Republic of China (PRC) has objected strongly to the Republic of Korea (ROK)'s plans to allow the United States of America (USA) to deploy a Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system on ROK territory. Although the PRC's general reaction was predictable, the vehemence of its opposition is noteworthy. This makes it useful to explore the PRC's reasons for responding as it did. Those involved in THAAD deployment must consider how their decisions might affect relations with Beijing, and those with a broader interest in foreign affairs will find that this incident provides a revealing case study of East Asian politics in the twenty-first century. This article draws on Sunzi's classic work of strategic theory to gain insights into the PRC's possible motivations and concludes that Beijing is exploiting the controversy to increase its leverage in matters beyond missile defense.

□ Key Words: THAAD, Sunzi, missile defense, ROK-US relations, People's Republic of China

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## 초록

중국은 한국이 미국의 남한 영토 내 사드 배치를 허용하려는 계획을 강력하게 반대했다. 중국의 반대는 쉽게 예상할 수 있는 일이었지만, 중국이 예상외로 격렬하게 반대하는 까닭을 진지하게 살펴볼 필요가 있다. 한국에 사드를 배치하는 문제는 중국에 미치는 영향도 함께 고려해야만 한다. 또한 대외정책에 관심을 가진 사람이라면 이 문제가 21세기 동아시아 국제정치 특성의 일단을 밝혀줄 사례라는 점도 확인할 수 있을 것이다. 이 논문에서는 손자병법의 고전이론을 참조해서 중국이 격렬하게 반대하는 까닭을 추적하고자 한다. 그래서 중국은 사드 배치 논쟁을 이용해서 미사일 방어 문제를 넘어서 포괄적 영역에서 중국의 영향력을 증대시키고자 한다는 결론을 도출할 것이다.

□ 주제어: 사드, 손자, 미사일 방어, 한미관계, 중국

One of the ironies of world politics is the fact that one party's attempts to protect itself can strike other parties as aggressive. Superficially, at least, the controversy which erupted in 2016 when the Republic of (South) Korea (ROK) and United States of America (USA) confirmed their decision to deploy the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense system (THAAD) on the Korean Peninsula appears to be a case in point. Although those responsible for the decision claim to have the motive of protecting the ROK from ballistic missile attack, and although the THAAD system's capabilities appear better suited to this than to any more sinister purpose, several nations have objected to the ROK-US decision. Not only did the Democratic People's Republic of (North) Korea (DPRK) protest, the People's Republic of China (PRC) was almost equally vehement. Beijing backed up its words by subjecting the ROK to trade restrictions, and by intimating that it would work with Russia to develop a military response.<sup>1)</sup>

Although few will be surprised that the PRC is dubious about the deployment of a new American weapons system on the Korean peninsula, those who wish to understand the 2016 THAAD dispute do well to ask what motivated the PRC to act so vigorously and so publicly at this juncture. For those who make foreign

1) Kim Hyung-A., "South Korea's THAAD Crisis," *East Asia Forum*, 9 September, 2016, available on-line at <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2016/09/09/south-koreas-thaad-crisis/>, accessed 13 January 2017; Emanuele Scimia, "Can China and Russia counter the US THAAD in South Korea?", *Asia Times*, 18 January 2017, available on-line at <http://www.atimes.com/can-china-russia-counter-us-thaad-south-korea/>, accessed 19 January 2017

policy in Seoul and Washington, the question is pressing, since the ROK and USA must now search for a way to proceed which balances their interest in improving South Korea's missile defenses against the risk of increasing tensions with Beijing and others. This article investigates the issues at stake in the THAAD controversy. The author concludes that the PRC perceives the affair as an opportunity to remind other political actors of its growing power, and thus to increase its leverage in matters which go beyond those of missile defense.

Although there are numerous participants in the THAAD dispute, this piece focuses on the PRC. One reason is that it would be impossible to discuss all actors in sufficient depth in a work the length of a journal article. Another -- and more significant -- reason is that the PRC's evolving economic capacity, military capabilities and diplomatic policies make it uniquely important to twenty-first century world politics. Not only is the PRC powerful, it is in the process of redefining its role in the world, and this makes it particularly important for all concerned to understand the direction which Beijing is taking.

The next section of this article discusses theoretical concepts which may help us analyze the THAAD issue, noting that classic works of strategic thought provide insights into this and other twenty-first century disputes. Sunzi's *Art of War* seems especially relevant. A third section discusses THAAD's potential to protect South Korean territory from ballistic missiles. One would expect the PRC to resist ROK-US missile defenses but the vehemence of Beijing's response is still noteworthy. The fourth section notes that the THAAD system has other capabilities which may also concern the PRC, but observes that these considerations do not fully explain the strength of Beijing's opposition either.

A fifth section explores the way readers of the *Art of War* might assess the THAAD affair. This analysis suggests that the most far-reaching significance of the controversy is its psychological importance as a defining moment in America's relations with its East Asian allies, and as a test of all parties' willingness to defer to the PRC. China's leaders appear to be exploiting it as such. A concluding section notes that this puts Seoul and Washington in an impossible situation but suggests that the fact that Beijing appears to be making foreign policy decisions in a well-considered way bodes well for all parties' ability to resolve future disputes more amicably.

## I. Thinking about THAAD

Those who wish to navigate the policy conundrums of the THAAD dispute — or simply to understand the controversy more thoroughly — will wish to explore the ways in which the participants might perceive the situation, the ways they might respond and what the implications of their choices might be. Many will find the issues involved familiar. At first glance, the opposing parties' positions in the dispute seem to conform to the well-known pattern of behavior in international relations known as the security dilemma. Debates over the effects of defensive systems on deterrence relationships seem relevant as well. Nevertheless, the twenty-first century situation on the Korean peninsula is sufficiently different from other examples of similar disputes to demand analysis as a fresh case. Classic works of strategic theory help us to assess the possibilities of such unprecedented situations.

What remains of this section will consider what theory and historical experience tells us about the THAAD dispute, beginning with the literature on the security dilemma. A security dilemma is, broadly speaking, a situation in which actors, none of whom trust each other, attempt to protect themselves from attack by accumulating power, typically by building up military forces. Whenever one participant succeeds at becoming more powerful, the others are apt to see that participant's success as threatening, and to respond by seeking even more power of their own. The party which originally made itself stronger is then likely to feel threatened once more, and to seek even greater power, thus motivating the others to counter it yet again in a self-perpetuating cycle. This competition for power may bankrupt the participants, and it may also lead to war, when one actor decides that the surest way to ensure its own survival is to eliminate a rival by force.

This idea goes back at least as far as Thucydides' history of the Peloponnesian War. Those seeking a detailed history of the use of the term "security dilemma" in the academic literature of international relations theory would do well to consult Shiping Tang's article "The Security Dilemma: A Conceptual Analysis."<sup>2</sup> As Tang notes, different theorists have used this concept to reach different conclusions.<sup>3</sup>

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2) Tang Shiping, "The Security Dilemma: A Conceptual Analysis," *Security Studies*, 18/3 (2009), <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09636410903133050?scroll=top&needAccess=true>, accessed 13 January 2017

Such influential Realists as Kenneth Waltz and John Mearsheimer argue that the security dilemma is the eternal condition of all states.<sup>4)</sup> Defensive Realists believe that states are capable of settling into stable deadlocks, whereas Offensive Realists hold that large and frequent wars are inevitable, but neither believe that human beings can change the underlying situation.<sup>5)</sup>

Liberal thinkers, on the other hand, raise the hope that political decisions -- notably the decision to adopt democratic forms of government -- can make it possible for state governments to trust each other sufficiently to escape the security dilemma.<sup>6)</sup> Constructivists such as Alexander Wendt have typically been less prescriptive, but they also argue that changes in the way people understand international politics can change the way in which international politics works.<sup>7)</sup> If people accept the premises of Offensive Realism, constructivists argue, they may well find themselves in the Offensive Realist version of the security dilemma; if they believe other things, they may produce entirely different relationships.

The ROK and USA clearly exist in a state of mutual mistrust with the Democratic People's Republic of (North) Korea (DPRK). This is presumably the main reason why the ROK and USA wish to deploy THAAD. Moreover, there are deficiencies of trust between and among the previously-mentioned states and the PRC, Japan, Russia, to name three more. The DPRK and PRC clearly find THAAD disturbing. Therefore, one can make a strong case that a security dilemma is in progress, and that the ROK-US decision has intensified it. The questions of what this means and what, if anything, any of the parties involved might do to influence the situation remain harder to resolve.

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3) Tang, "The Security Dilemma," <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09636410903133050?scroll=top&needAccess=true>

4) Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1979), 102; Waltz, *Theory*, 86-7; John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001), 19-21; Tang, "The Security Dilemma," <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09636410903133050?scroll=top&needAccess=true>

5) Mearsheimer, *Tragedy*, 4-22

6) Tang, "The Security Dilemma," <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09636410903133050?scroll=top&needAccess=true>

7) Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 1-11

Those who recall debates over the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, American president Ronald Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative, American president George W. Bush's 2001 decision to withdraw from the 1972 agreement and the ongoing controversy over the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO's) deployment of anti-missile systems may remember many other arguments for and against missile defense. Some of these historical arguments have concerned issues of feasibility and cost. Many doubted that it would be possible to invent a defensive system capable of shooting down enough ballistic missiles in flight to offer any country a meaningful level of protection against a nuclear missile attack. Missile defense opponents also noted that the mere attempt to develop such a system would be costly. Therefore, opponents argued, the wisest course of action for any nation was to resign itself to vulnerability.

Indeed, many opponents of missile defense add, vulnerability has positive advantages. Debates over anti-missile systems have often revolved around the concept of mutually assured destruction (MAD). Where security dilemma theory implies that anxiety promotes conflict, MAD theory implies that terror encourages restraint. If potential opponents know that all-out war will be mutual suicide, MAD advocates suggest, even bitter rivals will temper their behavior to avoid such an outcome.

MAD theory does not, however, definitively answer the question of whether anti-missile systems increase the likelihood of conflict. A shield which rendered its possessor immune to all harm would negate MAD. Nevertheless, as opponents of missile defense are often quick to note, no such thing exists. A more plausible way for MAD to fail would be for one party to a conflict to decide that it could launch a sufficiently swift and devastating attack to blunt its opponent's ability to strike back. This would be risky under the most favorable of circumstances and if the intended victim of such a preemptive attack had a defensive system it would be riskier still.

Limited missile defenses of the sort which exist in real life are unlikely to save a country from ruin in a large-scale war. They do, however, increase the odds that a meaningful number of their owners' offensive weapons would survive a surprise attack. Thus, they reinforce their owners' ability to avenge themselves, and thus, they might well discourage those who would otherwise be tempted to

preempt. In this sort of scenario, missile defenses strengthen MAD.

Ideas such as MAD and the security dilemma help one to generate ideas about the ways in which ROK-US missile defenses might affect international relations in East Asia. Both suggest ways in which various actors might perceive deployment. Nevertheless, one remains free to interpret both concepts in a wide variety of ways. For this reason alone, those who wish to reach conclusions about the consequences of THAAD deployment will need to exercise original judgment.

Moreover, one must note that both the current version of the security dilemma concept and MAD became popular during the Cold War. One cannot be sure that they are equally relevant today. Although influential Realists claim that the security dilemma is the universal condition of all actors in anarchical political systems, international relations theory has not advanced to the point at which one can treat such propositions as infallible. MAD theory also appears to contain universal elements -- surely all human beings will shrink from courses of action which they believe will end in their destruction -- but different people in different circumstances may make different assessments of what courses of action those might be. Technical and economic arguments for and against missile defense clearly must clearly evolve to reflect changing political situations and changing technological capabilities.

Thus, one does well to scrutinize the ways in which abstract concepts such as MAD and the security dilemma may -- or may not -- manifest themselves in twenty-first century Northeast Asia. For those who wish to undertake such scrutiny, the classical literature on strategy offers a starting point. This literature helps one navigate the intellectual problems which scholars and policymakers face when attempting to make sense of unfolding political situations involving the potential for dispute.<sup>8)</sup> In that spirit, this article examines the THAAD controversy using insights taken from the ancient Chinese author Sunzi's *The Art of War*.

The author's primary reason for using this work is that it addresses a significant number of the most prominent issues in the THAAD controversy. Sunzi's insights provide compelling explanations for facts which would otherwise be puzzling. Those with experience in political theory and practice have confirmed the value of *The Art of War* as a guide to analysis. For a recent discussion of Sunzi's utility,

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8) Thomas M. Kane, *Strategy: Key Thinkers* (Cambridge: Polity, 2013), *passim*.

one might consult Henry Kissinger's arguments in *On China*.<sup>9)</sup>

Moreover, Sunzi is currently influential in his home country. Kissinger, again, notes numerous cases in which *The Art of War* appears to have influenced modern Chinese leaders.<sup>10)</sup> This does not entitle one to indulge in cultural stereotyping. Nevertheless, when Sunzi suggests a promising way of handling a situation, it is reasonable to hypothesize that policymakers who have read *The Art of War* may have considered similar approaches. To this degree, an awareness of Sunzi's writings provides insight into contemporary Chinese strategy.

Although one cannot expect a text commonly dated to the sixth century BCE to discuss anti-missile systems, the *Art of War* takes a clear position on the general role of the defense. Sunzi's observations echo those which arose in the discussion of the security dilemma. *The Art of War* argues that one has a more consistent level of control over one's ability to improve one's defenses than one has over one's ability to render the enemy vulnerable.<sup>11)</sup> Therefore, one takes defensive measures to preserve one's resources while working to find -- or create -- an opportunity to strike.

By this logic, the ROK-US decision to deploy an anti-missile system is a potentially threatening act. Any who believe that they may be the target of this threat would be wise to take countermeasures. This may begin to explain why the PRC opposes THAAD, but it does not tell us why Beijing's reaction has taken the form which it has taken. Sunzi also emphasizes the importance of tailoring one's actions to the unique circumstances of one's situation.<sup>12)</sup> There are many ways in which Beijing might have responded to the ROK-US attempts to improve their missile defenses, and one does well to look further into the reasons why the PRC chose a course of fierce open resistance.

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9) Henry Kissinger, *On China*. (New York: The Penguin Press, 2011), 25-32

10) Kissinger, *On China*, 25-32 and *passim*

11) Sun Tzu (Samuel B. Griffith, trans.), *The Art of War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963), 85.

12) Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, 100-101

## II. THAAD's Capabilities

A step toward understanding the PRC leaders' motives is to look deeper into the ways in which THAAD affects Beijing's interests. One may begin by investigating the capabilities of the system being deployed. In July 2016, the US Army confirmed that it would send one THAAD battery to South Korea.<sup>13)</sup> Such a battery would normally include nine launchers, each typically carrying eight interceptor missiles.<sup>14)</sup> After firing a missile, the launcher crew requires approximately 30 minutes to reload.<sup>15)</sup>

THAAD has successfully intercepted missiles in tests.<sup>16)</sup> Nevertheless, there is no way to be certain how effective it would prove in combat. ROK and US commanders would be prudent to assume that at least some of the interceptors will miss. Therefore, one may estimate that the THAAD battery slated for deployment in Korea would be able to counter a maximum of 72 missiles in the opening phases of a war, and that the actual number is likely to be lower. Robert E. Kelly, writing in *The National Interest*, claims that the battery will have a mere 8-10 anti-missile rockets, although he does not explain how he arrives at that figure.<sup>17)</sup> At this point, one may wish to compare the number of missiles the ROK and US might reasonably hope to shoot down with the number of missiles which their potential enemies might fire. According to RAND author Markus Schiller, the preponderance of the open source literature indicates that the DPRK has over 1,000 missiles<sup>18)</sup>. America's Department of Defense states that Beijing has 1,000-1,200

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13) DOD News, 11 July, 2016, US to deploy THAAD missile battery to South Korea, <https://www.army.mil/article/171316>, accessed 13 January 2017

14) Anonymous, Date Unspecified, THAAD, Terminal High Altitude Area Defense, United States of America, <http://www.army-technology.com/projects/thaad/> accessed 15 January 2017

15) Anonymous, THAAD, <http://www.army-technology.com/projects/thaad/>

16) Anonymous, Date Unspecified, Elements, <https://www.mda.mil/system/thaad.html>, accessed 22 January 2017

17) Robert E. Kelly, "Can THAAD Save South Korea." *The National Interest*, 14 October 2016, available at <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/can-thaad-save-south-korea-18047>, accessed 14 January 2017

18) Markus Schiller, *Characterizing the North Korean Missile Threat* (Santa Monica: RAND, 2012), 62, available on-line at [http://www.rand.org/pubs/technical\\_reports/TR1268.html](http://www.rand.org/pubs/technical_reports/TR1268.html), accessed 15 January, 2017

short-range ballistic missiles, along with 200–300 medium-range ones.<sup>19)</sup> This is in addition to the PRC's land-based intercontinental ballistic missiles, anti-ship ballistic missiles, submarine-launched ballistic missiles and other related weapons systems which appear to be primarily for use in theatres outside Northeast Asia.

Another constraint on the THAAD system's capabilities is its range. THAAD interceptors are designed for use against incoming missiles up to 150km in altitude and 200km away.<sup>20)</sup> Since the interceptors are mounted on trucks, their owners can reposition them on relatively short notice. Nevertheless, critics of ROK-US deployment have noted that initial plans call for THAAD to be placed in an area which would leave many South Korean citizens, including the population of Seoul, unprotected.<sup>21)</sup> The fact that the proposed THAAD positions are much better suited to defend American military bases on the peninsula has excited further resentment.

The ROK/US forces' possible opponents face corresponding limitations. To begin with, as Schiller's study notes, the DPRK is unlikely to have enough skilled personnel to operate all its missiles effectively.<sup>22)</sup> An actual DPRK missile barrage would probably be smaller than the size of its arsenal might indicate. Thus, it would be easier for ROK/US defenses to counter.

The PRC, by contrast, appears to have well-trained missile forces at its disposal. Sean O'Connor of the Australian Military University has presented a report to the think tank Air Power Australia in which he evaluates the capabilities of Beijing's seven publicly known missile training bases in detail and concludes that these facilities can teach substantial numbers of personnel to perform a wide range of operations under realistic conditions.<sup>23)</sup> The PRC does, however, have long borders. Moreover, it is party to a multiplicity of disputes. Therefore, although one must assume that most of its missiles will be ready for action, its leaders will probably

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19) Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2016, *Annual Report to Congress, Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2016*, <https://www.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2016%20China%20Military%20Power%20Report.pdf>, accessed 16 January 2017, 109

20) Anonymous, THAAD, <http://www.army-technology.com/projects/thaad/>

21) Kim Hyung-A., "South Korea's THAAD Crisis," <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2016/09/09/south-koreas-thaad-crisis/>

22) Schiller, *Characterizing the North Korean Missile Threat*, 62

23) O'Connor, Sean, 2009, PLA Second Artillery Corps, <http://www.ausairpower.net/APA-PLA-Second-Artillery-Corps.html>, accessed 16 January 2017

be reluctant to position more than a fraction of them in Northeast Asia. In the event of a potentially violent conflict in that region, the proposed ROK/US THAAD deployment would be large enough to complicate even the PRC's strategic planning.

In addition to these facts, the most compelling reason for the PRC to take the proposed Korean THAAD battery's capabilities seriously is that it would not be operating in isolation. The ROK and US already have an anti-missile network based on the Aegis system and the Patriot. Since each system has distinctive capabilities, each has the potential to shoot down incoming missiles which the others might miss. An effectively coordinated defense incorporating all three systems would be more effective than one involving only one or two on their own. This suggests, however, that those who hope to restrain ROK-US attempts to develop missile defenses would be wise to oppose all components of this network, not merely THAAD.

To summarize, THAAD would unquestionably enhance Seoul and Washington's security vis a vis Pyongyang. Nevertheless, the improvement would be more evolutionary than revolutionary. THAAD would also affect the correlation of forces between the ROK/US and the PRC, but its impact there would be more modest still. This returns one to the question of why Beijing has opposed THAAD so strongly.

The PRC's level of opposition becomes particularly noteworthy when one considers the fact that Beijing has accepted other improvements to the ROK/US missile defense network with relatively little protest. In February 2016, for instance, the US sent an additional Patriot battery to Korea.<sup>24)</sup> The US dispatched yet another battery in July.<sup>25)</sup> Although Washington described these deployments as temporary, those who questioned America's good will had no reason to expect the US to remove the missiles on schedule. Journalists writing for *Military Times* at the time of the February deployment noted that representatives of US forces were reticent

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24) Hyung Jin-Kim, "US deploys more Patriot missiles in South Korea," *Military Times*, 13 February 2016, available on-line at <http://www.militarytimes.com/story/military/2016/02/13/us-deploys-more-patriot-missiles-south-korea/80336432/>, accessed 19 January 2017

25) Seth Robson, "Japan-based Patriot missile battery arrives in Korea," *Stars and Stripes*, 22 July 2016, available on-line at <https://www.stripes.com/news/japan-based-patriot-missile-battery-arrives-in-korea-1.420443>, accessed 19 January 2017

about plans for withdrawal.<sup>26)</sup> Nevertheless, throughout both deployments, PRC objections remained focused on THAAD.

### III. THAAD's Multiple Roles

It seems that those who wish to understand the strategic issues at stake in the controversy must look beyond THAAD's role in the defense of the ROK against ballistic missiles. Indeed, the PRC appears to be concerned that the AN/TPY-2 radar which supports the THAAD system can observe more than necessary to protect South Korea. The system may, for instance, supplement America's own missile defense network. Analyst Emanuele Scimia explores this issue and some of the PRC's responses to it in a recent article for *Asia Times*.<sup>27)</sup> One may also speculate that AN/TPY-2 could play a role in space surveillance.

The fact that AN/TPY-2 has the potential to serve multiple purposes makes Beijing's reaction to ROK-US proposals easier to understand. Nevertheless, just as the proposed THAAD deployment would be no more than a single component of South Korea's anti-missile system, it would be but one node in the US defense and intelligence networks as well. Rod Lyon of the Australian Strategic Policy Institute documented this point in a February 2016 article.<sup>28)</sup> Just as the PRC has been phlegmatic about other US attempts to reinforce the ROK's missile defenses, it has been comparatively restrained in its opposition to previous deployments of AN/TPY-2. In 2014, for instance, a representative of the PRC's Foreign Ministry objected to "a certain country['s]" deployment of this technology in Japan, but discreetly avoided criticizing the US by name.<sup>29)</sup> Again, one does well to ask

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26) Hyung Jin-Kim, "US deploys," <http://www.militarytimes.com/story/military/2016/02/13/us-deploys-more-patriot-missiles-south-korea/80336432/>

27) Scimia, "Can China and Russia counter," <http://www.atimes.com/can-china-russia-counter-us-thaad-south-korea/>

28) Rod Lyon, "The Hard Truth About THAAD, South Korea and China," *The National Interest*, 23 February 2016, available on-line at <http://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-buzz/the-hard-truth-about-thaad-south-korea-china-15295>, accessed 20 January 2017; Anonymous, Rod Lyon, <https://www.aspi.org.au/research/find-an-expert/rod-lyon>, accessed 20 January 2017

29) Eric Slavin, "US radar deployment in Japan draws Chinese rebuke," *Stars and Stripes*, 24 October,

why the PRC has responded so much more vigorously to the possibility of a similar deployment in Korea.

#### IV. The Uses of Controversy

This is a point at which Sunzi's writings may illuminate the issues driving the THAAD controversy. Sunzi advises readers to approach a war -- or, presumably, any other adversarial encounter -- by assessing such factors as the opposing sides' political will, social cohesion and decisionmaking tendencies.<sup>30)</sup> *The Art of War* also emphasizes the importance of timing.<sup>31)</sup> If PRC strategists take a similar approach, they will almost certainly have observed that substantial portions of the American body politic is reluctant to risk confrontations abroad, that substantial portions of the South Korean body politic is skeptical of Seoul's ties to Washington, that the South Korean head of state who presided over the decision to deploy THAAD is the subject of great controversy, that the process leading up to THAAD deployment overlapped with the American presidential election and that the process precedes national elections in the ROK as well.

There is evidence that the PRC's leadership does, indeed, take these sorts of issues into account in its handling of the THAAD crisis. Chinese leaders certainly seem aware that ROK president Park Geyun-hye's political difficulties provide them with special opportunities to challenge the proposed deployment. United Press International has reviewed the way in which the PRC's state-run media outlets have reported on the political situation in South Korea.<sup>32)</sup> *Xinhua*, *People's Daily* and other PRC-based news sources have emphasized the controversial ROK president's connections to the equally controversial missile defense system.<sup>33)</sup> These news

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2014, available on-line at <https://www.stripes.com/news/us-radar-deployment-in-japan-draws-chinese-rebuke-1.309988>, accessed 20 January 2017

30) Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, 63-5; Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, 114-115

31) Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, 139-40

32) Elizabeth Shim, "South Korea scandal could affect THAAD, Chinese media says," *UPI*, 31 October 2016, available on-line at [http://www.upi.com/Top\\_News/World-News/2016/10/31/South-Korea-scandal-could-affect-THAAD-Chinese-media-says/8341477927650/](http://www.upi.com/Top_News/World-News/2016/10/31/South-Korea-scandal-could-affect-THAAD-Chinese-media-says/8341477927650/), accessed 20 January 2017

sources encourage Chinese readers to hope that Park's difficulties will reduce the chances of THAAD ever being deployed.<sup>34)</sup>

PRC strategists may reasonably hope that there will be points during this period of elections and domestic political disputes in which South Korean leaders, American leaders, or both might reconsider their policies. One can imagine scenarios in which beleaguered incumbents try to distance themselves from controversy. One can also imagine situations in which new administrations make radical efforts to start afresh. Incoming American president Donald Trump's openly voiced concerns about the cost of maintaining forces in South Korea increase the plausibility of such a development in the US.<sup>35)</sup> Meanwhile, Moon Jae-in, leader of the ROK's main opposition party, has argued that his country should delay THAAD deployment for long enough to allow the next administration to reconsider its policies on this issue.<sup>36)</sup>

Moreover, this is a period in which THAAD is likely to receive particularly intense media coverage, and in which the controversy is likely to be particularly divisive. Even if Seoul and Washington deploy the anti-missile system as planned, memories of the controversy may affect future policy decisions in both countries. If the PRC can make those memories painful ones, it can give South Koreans and Americans alike one more reason to choose easier courses on later occasions. Such things have happened before.

In 2012, for instance, the PRC and the Philippines clashed over disputed maritime territory in the region of Scarborough Shoal. Beijing asserted its position emphatically. Initially, the outcome appeared mixed. America backed Manila, an

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33) Shim, "South Korea scandal," [http://www.upi.com/Top\\_News/World-News/2016/10/31/South-Korea-scandal-could-affect-THAAD-Chinese-media-says/8341477927650/](http://www.upi.com/Top_News/World-News/2016/10/31/South-Korea-scandal-could-affect-THAAD-Chinese-media-says/8341477927650/).

34) Shim, "South Korea scandal," [http://www.upi.com/Top\\_News/World-News/2016/10/31/South-Korea-scandal-could-affect-THAAD-Chinese-media-says/8341477927650/](http://www.upi.com/Top_News/World-News/2016/10/31/South-Korea-scandal-could-affect-THAAD-Chinese-media-says/8341477927650/)

35) Yuka Koshino, "Q&A: How Much Do U.S. Military Bases in Japan and Korea Cost? What are the arguments for and against keeping the bases in place?," *The Wall Street Journal*, 28 April, 2016, available on-line at <http://www.wsj.com/articles/q-a-how-much-do-u-s-military-bases-in-japan-and-korea-cost-1461822624>, accessed 20 January 2017

36) Christine Kim and James Pearson, "South Korea presidential hopeful: U.S. missile defense should wait," *Reuters*, 15 Dec., 2016, available on-line at <http://www.wsj.com/articles/q-a-how-much-do-u-s-military-bases-in-japan-and-korea-cost-1461822624>, accessed 20 January 2017

assortment of other Southeast Asian states sought closer security ties to the US and Beijing tacitly accepted an arrangement in which America mediated a resolution to the dispute.<sup>37)</sup>

One could well have concluded that the PRC's attempts to enforce its claims on the disputed territory had been futile, or even counterproductive. Nevertheless, the PRC coast guard continued to intimidate Philippines-based fishing vessels in the contested region, and none of the nations which backed Filipino claims in 2012 proved willing to confront Beijing so directly again.<sup>38)</sup> In 2016, after four years, the PRC voluntarily withdrew its armed vessels, possibly in response to a ruling at the Permanent Court of Arbitration at the Hague, possibly as a benevolent gesture accompanying Philippines president Rodrigo Duterte's visit to Beijing, or possibly for other reasons of its own.<sup>39)</sup> Meanwhile, the Philippines has been cautious about accepting subsequent US military deployments, and a range of informed commentators interpret this as a sign that the Filipino leadership found America's show of support in 2012 less than reassuring.<sup>40)</sup> Although the PRC may not have achieved all of its aims in the short term, it seems to have earned a greater degree of deference. The THAAD controversy provides the PRC with a comparable op-

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37) Thomas M. Kane, "China's 'Power Projection' Capabilities," *Parameters*, 44, No. 4, Winter 2014-15, 33. available on-line at [http://strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pubs/parameters/Issues/Winter\\_2014-15/Parameters\\_Winter2014\\_15\\_v44n4.pdf](http://strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pubs/parameters/Issues/Winter_2014-15/Parameters_Winter2014_15_v44n4.pdf), accessed 27 January 2017; National Institute for Defense Studies, *East Asian Strategic Review 2013* (Tokyo: Japan Times, 2013), 227-28, available on-line at [http://www.nids.mod.go.jp/english/publication/east-asian/pdf/2013/east-asian\\_e2013\\_06.pdf](http://www.nids.mod.go.jp/english/publication/east-asian/pdf/2013/east-asian_e2013_06.pdf), accessed 25 January 2017; Ely Ratner, "Learning the Lessons of Scarborough Reef," *The National Interest*, 21 November, 2013, available on-line at <http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/learning-the-lessons-scarborough-reef-9442>, accessed 21 January 2017

38) Manuel Mogato, "Philippines says Chinese vessels have left disputed shoal," *Reuters*, 28 October 2016, available on-line at <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-philippines-southchinesea-china-idUSKCN12S18B>, accessed 21 January 2017; Paul Carsten and Manuel Mogato, "China says 'situation' at disputed Scarborough Shoal has not changed," *Reuters*, 31 Oct, 2016, available on-line at <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-southchinesea-china-philippines-idUSKBN12V0YT>, accessed 21 January 2017

39) Mogato, "Philippines says," <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-philippines-southchinesea-china-idUSKCN12S18B>; Carsten and Mogato, "China says," <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-southchinesea-china-philippines-idUSKBN12V0YT>

40) Kane, "China's 'Power Projection' Capabilities," 33; National Institute for Defense Studies, *East Asian Strategic Review*, 227-28

portunity to assert itself.

If public opinion in the ROK and America increasingly turns against potentially difficult shared military ventures such as THAAD deployment, and if leaders in both countries become increasingly reluctant to make controversial decisions, one can expect both South Korea and the United States to take more conciliatory positions toward China. Under these circumstances, one would also expect ROK-US military ties to loosen. Readers of *The Art of War* will recall Sunzi's claim that the best strategy is to attack one's opponents' plans.<sup>41)</sup> The second-best strategy, Sunzi tells us, is to attack one's opponent's alliances.<sup>42)</sup> By stepping up its opposition to THAAD at this point, the PRC has both a chance to influence two occasional rivals' planning processes and an opportunity to influence their relationship.

## V. Conclusion

The PRC has challenged the ROK-US proposal at a well-chosen moment, for reasons which go beyond the issue of missile defense. No matter how the administrations in Seoul and Washington respond, Beijing has already succeeded at putting them under strain. If South Korea and America they are unwilling to cede influence to the PRC, and, indeed, the DPRK, they will need to persevere in policies designed to maintain their own freedom of action, and they will need to rally public support for such policies. This will almost certainly mean sustaining close ROK-US cooperation in all areas, including military. It does not inevitably mean going ahead with THAAD deployment, but Seoul and Washington will find it easier to express shared resolve by proceeding with their plans than by abandoning those plans under pressure.

The irony remains that the ROK, USA and PRC have little to gain from conflict. Ultimately, the ancient Chinese thinker with the greatest potential to help one understand the THAAD dispute may be, not Sunzi, but Laozi, who reflected that armies leave wastelands where they march.<sup>43)</sup> One must hope that all parties

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41) Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, 77-8

42) Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, 77-8

43) Lao Tzu (D. C. Lau, trans.), *Tao te Ching* (London: Penguin, 1963), 88

will find a way to improve their relations at a fundamental level. Given this fact, the likelihood that policymakers in the PRC — or any of the other countries concerned — may be taking inspiration from *The Art of War* is encouraging. Sunzi encourages readers to consider the broader implications of strategic decisions, rather than becoming caught up in the passions of the moment, and disputes such as the THAAD controversy will be easiest to transcend peacefully if all parties remember to focus on the long term.

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