

China's concerns go beyond security; an analysis of China's response to the deployment of THAAD in ROK

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A series of nuclear tests conducted by the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) and the threat posed by such tests over the past decade have left the United States frustrated; and Japan and the Republic of Korea (ROK) particularly worried. The various complaints over the restlessness of the DPRK emerging from these tests have consistently embarrassed China, Pyongyang's only official ally. As a matter of fact, the Chinese government has increased its - previously rare - efforts to persuade the leader of the DPRK to be more conciliatory on the nuclear issue; however, as expected, these efforts have not yielded any significant impact on President Kim Jong-un, who was named the world's 49th Most Powerful Person by the *Forbes*.³ Given this, the government of the ROK decided to turn to its most trusted ally for nuclear protection. In July 2016, the U.S. and the ROK agreed to deploy the Terminal High-Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system in Seongju County, arguing that THAAD was a necessary response to the DPRK's aggressiveness demonstrated by its development and testing of nuclear and hydrogen bombs and ballistic missile technology. These actions were seen as flagrant violations of the agreement made by the six-party talk which was a China-led mediation and attended by DPRK, ROK, China, the United States, Russia and Japan on the non-proliferation principle and security on the Korean Peninsula. The argument goes further for China as it should reevaluate its

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³ *Forbes*, November 5, 2014. <http://www.koreatimesus.com/president-park-named-46th-most-powerful-person-by-forbes-kim-jong-un-49th//> Accessed on Sep 2016.

policy toward DPRK rather than blindly retaliate against ROK's self-defense in order to address the concerns over THAAD missile deployment.⁴

Since the deployment plan was announced, it has become a thorny issue for both China and the ROK and has certainly undermined the mutual trust between the two countries, which is openly supported by the United States. Chinese officials and academics have repeatedly questioned the implications of the THAAD system deployment, pointing out that it would “destabilize the security balance in the region *en bloc*.”⁵ Much stronger backlash also came from Chinese media indicating that the threat posed by THAAD directly impairs the security concerns of China. Beijing has insisted that the six-party talk actually has acted as a collective forum to resolve the DPRK nuclear issue. In addition, China has persistently urged the DPRK and the U.S. to engage in direct dialogue about their disputes. Yet, when the DPRK tested its H-bomb in early 2016, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi was frustrated by stating that the relationship between China and DPRK belonged to normal one like the common practice in diplomacy and denounced its test.⁶ Although Chinese government has persuaded the DPRK leaders to exercise self-restraint on the nuclear issue, the ROK still perceives that China is not completely restoring Seoul's confidence in its sincerity and capability. As a result, the ROK has turned to the umbrella of the United States to bolster its security.

This paper argues that China's concerns over the THAAD issue should be taken seriously by both the ROK and the United States. As a rising global power, China would not accept any sort of arrangement in which its core security interests are threatened, particularly while the country's leadership has dedicated significant resources and time to achieve the end of the nuclear crisis on the Korean Peninsula. In addition, Chinese leaders and its public are particularly sensitive to the way they are perceived regionally. China cannot be passive following the deployment of THAAD when considering the territorial disputes with other countries in the East and South China Seas, as this passiveness could lead to a perception of an incompetent China in world affairs. Moreover, Chinese leaders have insisted on talking to the DPRK through “third channel diplomacy” which allows for greater Chinese influence. Given all these considerations, this paper aims to prove that

⁴ Paul Haenle & Anne Sherman, “The Real Answer to China's THAAD Dilemma”, *The Diplomat*, 9-12-2016

⁵ “THAAD a threat to ‘stability in region’”, *China Daily*, September 6, 2016.

⁶ *China's Global News*, January 7, 2016.

China's position on THAAD would be better understood if considered from Beijing's perspective. Since China is much concerned with the regional strategic equilibrium, it has worked to settle the disputes among nations involved through peace and mutual respect amid the context of America's pivoting strategy to Asia. As the formal statement from the Foreign Ministry of China recently clarified, the ROK and the United States need "to take China's reasonable concerns into consideration and stop the deployment process immediately".⁷

China perceived or misperceived

Due to the historical, cultural, and geopolitical ties, China is only the great power in the world that maintains a significant formal diplomatic relationship with both North and South Korea. This offers Beijing certain diplomatic leverage in managing the crisis on the Korean Peninsula. Yet, recent studies indicate that ties between China and the DPRK have weakened over the past two decades. For example, President Xi Jinping deliberately sent a delegation of advisers to Pyongyang shortly after taking office to deliver a personal letter to the supreme leader of the DPRK, Kim Jong-un; however, Kim welcomed this message with a satellite rocket launch in December 2012 followed shortly thereafter by a nuclear test in February 2013, which coincided with Chinese New Year and the eve of President Xi's annual Party Congress. Given this, it is widely believed that this kind of response marked a shift toward many DPRK actions that have disillusioned the Chinese leadership and people about their communist neighbor. When Kim tested the fifth nuclear missile on September 8, 2016, after having already stolen the world's attention from China-held G-20 summit just 30 hours ago by firing three ballistic missiles, the action intensified the growing divide in China's relationship with the DPRK and Kim.⁸ Under these circumstances, both Chinese leaders and scholars who have traditionally pushed for the nation to preserve good relations with DPRK are less and less inclined to find justifications for Pyongyang's actions.

Despite the indications of a growing coldness between China and the DPRK, a report from *Xinhua News* in early 2016 revealed that the General Secretary of the Communist Party and President of State Xi Jin-ping met with a North Korean delegation

⁷ "THAAD deployment must be stopped" *China Daily*, November 5-6, 2016 (Diplomacy)

⁸ Paul Haenle & Anne Sherman, Op cit.

led by Ri Su-yong, a Workers' Party Politburo of the DPRK member and the Chief of the Party's Bureau of Foreign Affairs. During the meeting, Xi reportedly highlighted the importance of Chinese and North Korean collaboration for Chinese security and reiterated the nation's stance towards alleviating tensions on the Korean Peninsula. Namely, China supposedly reiterated its belief that all relevant parties ought to keep calm, exercise restraint, and engage in talks to uphold peace and stability on the Peninsula. This is the current policy of China toward the DPRK, and the meeting between Xi Jin-ping and Ri Su-yong exemplified China's resolve and confidence in its current foreign policy agenda.⁹

Yet, over the same period, the course of Chinese-South Korean relations has advanced more substantially. Chinese President Xi and former President Park Geun-hye developed a palpable personal connection that lent momentum to a broader *rapprochement*, shown by mutual state visits to national capitals in 2013 and 2014, followed by Park's attendance to the Beijing military parade in September 2015. South Korea has long hoped that closer ties with China would generate a greater impact on the North Korean nuclear issue; however, the close economic partnership between Beijing and Seoul has not translated into strategic areas as expected. A few South Korean politicians and scholars have argued that after agreeing to the "full, complete implementation" of UN Resolution 2270 following North Korea's fifth nuclear test, Beijing has remained a reluctant partner in addressing nuclear proliferation by the self-isolated Communist regime.¹⁰ China has ambiguously watered down sanctions and draft resolutions against Pyongyang and has allowed for superficial enforcement of the aforementioned resolutions out of fear that the punitive measures could spark an escalation of the collapse of North Korea followed by domestic turbulence. Moreover, China does not see rigid enforcement on the measures as necessarily in its own national security interests. China's economic engagement with the DPRK, though not necessarily a violation of the UN sanctions, partially undermines the effectiveness of multilateral sanctions approved by the international organization.¹¹

If disputes between weaker and stronger powers are considered, it is more logical and rational for the stronger side to take the first step toward peace. In comparison, ROK is

⁹*People's Daily*, June 2, 2016.

¹⁰ China: Resolution 2270 needs to be fully implemented; http://bbs.tiexue.net/post2_11306377_1.html accessed.

¹¹ Haenle & Sherman, Op cit.

much stronger than the DPRK in all vital factors, such as GDP, population, productivities and international image, not mention of its ally—the United States. Yet, given that the nuclear issue of the DPRK should be resolved by peace rather than force or coercive diplomacy, the failure to make progress on the nuclear issue is only reinforced by the fact that the DPRK's nuclear weapons and ballistic missile capabilities have continued to increase. In July 2016, the ROK and United States jointly endorsed the final deployment of the THAAD system by the end of 2017 to enhance the ROK's defense capabilities against alleged nuclear threats from its northern neighbor. Washington has conveyed to its Beijing counterparts that the decision to deploy was made “directly in response to the threat posed by the DPRK in its nuclear and missile programs,” and it was “purely a defensive measure, and not aimed at threatening China's security.”¹² China, however, has seen the deployment of THAAD as part of a broader effort on the part of the United States to “pivot” against China's growing power in Asia and the Pacific.

China has contended that THAAD would reduce its nuclear deterrent capability that “is essential to any great nuclear power,” as Joseph Nye Jr. argued.¹³ Therefore, the leaders in Beijing perceive the hidden motives behind the THAAD deployment that threaten not just China but also Russia. This led these two strong powers to issue a statement in July condemning the deployment of THAAD in South Korea and alleging that it poses an upset to the balance of power in East Asia. Since then, China and Russia have worked closely to challenge the THAAD system. China views the THAAD deployment as a United States' subplot to establish a regional anti-missile system, while simultaneously enhancing U.S. capabilities against China's security interest and undermining the overall strategic equilibrium in East Asia.

China's resentment has manifested itself in firm retaliatory steps, such as an unprecedented level of harsh rhetoric. For example, China canceled ROK pop concerts and a ROK TV drama broadcast nationally, sending the stocks of some of the entertainment companies into sharp decline. China then reportedly revoked visas for ROK tourists. In addition, the Chinese Air Force announced a routine deployment in order to enhance the capabilities of the country's existing anti-missile efficiency. In the words of Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, “the recent decision by the ROK has undermined the

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Joseph Nye, Jr. *Understanding the International Conflicts*, pp. 140-141

foundation of our bilateral ties based upon mutual trust. The result could set back our relations to the lowest point in either leader's tenure, despite the growing trust and cooperation that had been achieved previously."¹⁴

Currently, China and the ROK have enhanced multiple channels of dialogue on the nuclear issue. Yet, as a more extreme contingent of Chinese scholars has emerged in the aftermath of the THAAD decision, some have advocated that China not only take strong steps to punish the ROK, including sanctions against THAAD-affiliated Korean companies, services, and the politicians who have supported the deployment, but also should reevaluate its previous policy of sanctions against North Korea. They go on to argue that China should enhance its anti-missile capabilities with the purpose of minimizing THAAD's deterrence capabilities and should deepen its military and strategic ties with Russia. Among those supporting these suggested policy changes are primarily military staff advisors and the think tanks affiliated with Chinese Communist Party's Department of International Liaison. These groups believe that an appropriate response from China would be to loosen sanctions on the DPRK and look to repair and develop greater connections with Pyongyang.¹⁵

In both political and psychological terms, North Korea embodies complex legacies for China. In the eyes of many Chinese, the Korean War is held as a crucial symbol of China's determination to end its "century of humiliation" and "stand up" on the world stage, and also as a warning against becoming involved in wars whose origins China does not control and whose repercussions may have serious long-term, unforeseen consequences. Given this and China's close ties with South Korea in terms of trade, finance and cultural contacts, Beijing has advocated diplomatic engagements with both North and South Korea as a way to relieve tensions on the peninsula.

China's concerns and diplomacy

According to the 1991 UN Assembly Protocol, two Koreas were admitted jointly into the United Nations. Since then, the ROK has been a legally sovereign state with full legitimate rights to decide when, where, and how to protect its own security and core

¹⁴ *Global Time*, July 28, 2016

¹⁵ Tong Zhao, "China and South Korea's Path to Consensus on THAAD." *Carnegie-Tsinghua Review*, 8-23-2016

interests. Nevertheless, this power should be cautiously applied. Good diplomacy must consider the political context from the point of view of other nations. Realist scholar Hans Morgenthau once warned that “Nothing is so fatal to a nation as an extreme of self-partiality, and the total want of consideration of what others will naturally hope or fear.”¹⁶ It is true that an alliance would be the most efficacious way to achieve this. To that end, South Korea has already obtained what it needs from its alliance with the United States. Yet, military is not the only means of safeguarding against a formidable state. Although Seoul has explained to Chinese leaders that THAAD is for self-defense only, its deployment in such close proximity has inevitably generated friction, intensified by mutual misperception on both sides of the THAAD system’s purpose. Due to this, China’s responses need to be studied within the context of its security interests and its overall concerns, as elaborated below.

Firstly, in an anarchic world system, states are not always perceived precisely. Instead, they live in the realm of imagery and illusion.¹⁷ Thus, much of China’s frustration towards the ROK’s decision is due to the timing of announcing the THAAD deployment. The announcement was made on July 8, just four days before the Hague was scheduled to rule on the South China Sea dispute between China and the Philippines. The perception by the Chinese public was that the ROK timed the deployment during a time when China was focused on the arbitration of the South China Sea. Sooner or later, Chinese leaders would be silent on the issue of THAAD as they are sincere to maintain stable relations with the United States and meanwhile to have comprehensive constructive partnership the ROK as well.

Despite China’s recent shift toward less tolerant policies in DPRK and more supportive to U.S.-led sanctions against it, Seoul still sees Pyongyang’s nuclear provocations as proof that China has not fully leveraged its economic and geopolitical strength over DPRK to restrain its aggressions. In this milieu, China’s insistence on more cooperative with ROK in view of DPRK’s tests will likely only deepen Seoul’s suspicions over China’s sincerity in their efforts and potentially even engender mistrust between the countries’ leadership. Without a change in DPRK behavior, the ROK continues to criticize China as an evasive partner on their security issues. Therefore, the ROK has felt it should

¹⁶ Hans Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations*, p. 587.

¹⁷ John Stoessinger, *Nations in Darkness: China, Russia, and America*, p. 5.

seek stronger arrangements with the United States and Japan. In other words, the ROK's reliance on THAAD actually reflects its disappointment with China's inability to restrain the DPRK's provocations and nuclear ambition.¹⁸

As a matter of fact, Chinese critics were rarely directed against former President Park Geun-hye, who was proactive in cooperating with China from the beginning of her term. Nevertheless, ROK's military and its conservatives have wielded significant power over the president and her policy-making team. Because of this, the Chinese military suspended its annual dialogues with South Korean counterparts. If this continues, the misperception and mistrust between China and the ROK could generate a deeper impact on the Korean Peninsula and the whole region as well.¹⁹ Consequently, both Japan and South Korea would enhance their joint efforts with the United States in developing their own nuclear arsenals in view of a restless DPRK. If they failed to make Pyongyang abandon the nuclear development program, nuclear-armed ROK and Japan would trigger a regional arms race, militarize their ties with each other and inevitably lead to further cooperation between China and Russia which simply send the whole region into the dangerous confrontation.

Unfortunately, on November 16, 2016, the military chiefs of the ROK and U.S. agreed to finalize the deployment of THAAD and also concluded an agreement for greater military intelligence cooperation between the ROK and Japan.²⁰ The ROK stated that THAAD would complement its Patriot Missile System, giving its nation and people a stronger sense of security. The ROK strongly rejects the notion that THAAD's deployment was the result of coercion by the United States.

Second, from the very beginning, China's protest over THAAD has been directed at the United States rather than South Korea. Since Washington is regarded as the contriver of the strategy of pivoting toward East Asia and of the deployment of THAAD as well, China is weary of the U.S. motives. THAAD's technology – particularly the powerful X-band radar – will be able to effectively look into Chinese territory, generating significant discomfort on China's side. Chinese officials have asserted that the United States must

¹⁸ Tong Zhao, "China and South Korea's Path to Consensus on THAAD, 8-23-2016

¹⁹ *Global Times*, Nov. 6, 2016

²⁰ Ankit Panda, "It is official: The United States and South Korea agree to deploy THAAD", *The Diplomat*, July 8, 2016.

be pressuring South Korea to deploy THAAD as part of a broader strategy. Considering the Obama Administration's strategy of returning to the Asian-Pacific in 2012, China has argued that the ruling power, like the United States, has made all efforts to contain the peaceful rise of China, even though Beijing vows to maintain the *status quo* defined at the Yalta system and to follow the policy of "peaceful rise". In terms of the uncertainties in the region where China has multiple territorial disputes with other neighbors along its borders and in the South China Sea, the United States has ostensibly made efforts to remain vigilant of China's growing power through a U.S.-led coalition.²¹ Yet, leaders in both Beijing and Washington fully understand their positions in the world's balance of power, so they have tried to avoid the risks of "nuclear confrontation." This is explicitly demonstrated by the fact that both the US and China express their agreement at the UN Security Council that North Korea must fully abandon rather than just curtail its nuclear program.²²

It is necessary for China to approach the United States, under either the Republic or the Democratic presidency, for insurance of whether it is to further tolerate Kim Jong-un's stubborn belligerence and defiance, which directly challenge China's core interests and will probably result in greater U.S. military presence and relationship building regionally, or to employ greater pressure to stop the DPRK's irrational behavior.²³ In view of the asymmetry of technological capacity between the United States and the DPRK, any further provocation would be taken as the pretext by the ROK – backed by the United States and Japan – to initiate a formal conflict on the Korean Peninsula. Such conflict is what China eagerly wants to avoid by all means, particularly since China has argued that negotiations with the DPRK did achieve some progresses before.

It is true that historically and in today's reality, China has never challenged the concept that the United States is an Asian-Pacific power. In effect, the leaders of China and the United States have publicly recognized the two countries' common interest in charting a constructive outcome in terms of "new type of great-power relations," so often invoked and so slow in emerging, as Kissinger observed.²⁴ In view of North Korea's pursuit for nuclear capability, Japan and South Korea have been the key allies in the fight against

²¹ Henry Kissinger, *On China*, pp. 99-100.

²² Haenle & Sherman, *Op cit.*

²³ Tong Zhao, "China and South Korea's Path to Consensus on THAAD, 8-23-2016

²⁴ Henry Kissinger, *World Order*, p. 231.

nuclear proliferation; and a nuclear-armed South Korea and Japan would probably trigger regional nuclear confrontation, which would impact their alliance with the United States and lead to much more assertive China and Russia to secure their core interests. No great power wants to see this scenario, in which they would lose control in the region unfold.

China could impose more stringent sanctions on its adjacent, but self-isolated ideological ally, in order to restrain Pyongyang's nuclear ambition. However, this would undoubtedly alienate North Korea from China and make it more willing to act in ways that ignores Chinese security concerns and the region's stability. On the one hand, even though China has considerable influence over the DPRK, it cannot be considered a proxy state of any great power since it has developed the capability to independently make decisions. On the other hand, China is gravely concerned about the prospects of the DPRK, especially since the collapse of the Kim regime could result in a massive refugee flow into China's northeastern region or even a "hot war" between the North and South Korea. One study by a Chinese think tank estimated that about 3 million North Korean refugees would cross the Chinese border in the wake of a sudden end to Kim's reign. Another concern is that whatever new regime that arises after Kim could adopt favorable attitudes towards the United States and push the Korean Peninsula further away from China, which is also an undesirable outcome. Given these uncertainties, China remains reluctant to impose harsher sanctions on the DPRK in view of preserving the *status quo* in the whole region.²⁵

Finally, in an analysis of the relations between China and DRPR, Kissinger observed that China should not take more responsibilities for Pyongyang's behavior. He echoed what Bismarck had remarked 150 years ago, "we now live in a wondrous time, in which the strong is weak because of its scruples and the weak grows strong because of its audacity."²⁶ DPRK is ruled under no accepted principle of legitimacy, not even its claimed Communist one, and its principal points of leverage have been to build a few nuclear devices. Currently, it has no military capability to engage in war with the United States and its allies. However, the existence of these weapons has a political impact far exceeding their military utility. The weapons have provided an incentive for Japan and South Korea

²⁵ Wang Li, "The Future of Diplomacy: the Case of the DPRK & H-Bomb" *The Diplomatic Insight*, vol. 9, issue 1, January 2016, pp. 10-11.

²⁶ Kissinger, *World Order*, p. 230.

to create a nuclear capability which would coerce Pyongyang into disproportionate risk-taking with its limited capabilities, increasing the threat of another war in the region.

Given all the considerations discussed above, it is misleading to argue that the deployment of THAAD now presents China with a zero-sum security dilemma in which it must choose between safeguarding its security and advancing constructive relations with the ROK that hosts the THAAD battery. Following bilateral meetings at the recent G-20 summit in Hangzhou, former South Korean President Park Geun-hye reconfirmed her commitment to maintaining close contact with her Chinese counterpart on THAAD, and Foreign Minister Wang Yi expressed his support for holding bilateral consultations to find a mutually acceptable solution.²⁷ Chinese leaders talked openly about the issue, commenting that the THAAD interceptors would not provide any substantial protection for ROK and that its current advanced technologies would be remedied soon by joint Sino-Russian efforts.²⁸ In sum, operational experts have reconfirmed their commitment to defusing tensions on the peninsula; in fact, all involved parties have jointly identified feasible alternatives to foster mutual understanding and respect, which are the key to improving the relations among nations.

Conclusion

The ROK's deployment of THAAD has become the real issue to China since the country views its core interests at stake. Moreover, China's security dilemma has emerged as a response to the military presence of the United States; in turn, China has increasingly turned to developing a stronger Sino-Russian comprehensive strategic partnership. Considering this vulnerable milieu, China must be very careful in seeking security arrangements favorable to Beijing's strategic needs. China's strong response to the deployment of THAAD reflected its serious and reasoned calculations based upon three principles: the bottom line, credibility, and China's capability to safeguard its security interests. The bottom line refers to the fact that China, as a rising power, cannot have its national security threatened by any other great power or their allies. At present, Chinese leaders have made sincere efforts to avoid direct conflicts with the United States; however, they also need to review the previous approach to the DPRK's nuclear issue. Yet, neither

²⁷ *China News*, September 4, 2016.

²⁸ Yang Cheng-jun, "Are China's Concerns not the Deployment of THAAD?" *Global Times*, July 13, 2016.

economic sanctions against the DPRK nor the loosening of sanctions against it will enhance regional strategic stability and security, as expected by all sides involved.

In view of the uncertainties on the Korean Peninsula, China needs to unveil its strategic thinking and the corresponding credibility. It is vital for China to demonstrate its credibility when inviting other powers to accept diplomatic means to resolving the current DPRK nuclear weapons development crisis. At the recent Xiang-shan Strategic Forum, a senior Chinese strategic scholar frankly stated that in terms of disputes between weak and strong powers, it is more logical and rational for the stronger side to take the first step to demonstrate good-will.²⁹ Given this, the nuclear issue of the DPRK should be resolved by peace rather than force. Applying pressure will not necessarily lead to beneficial policy adjustments, as demonstrated by the United States' lack of success in applying coercive measures against North Korea. Given that the ROK strongly believes THAAD is vital to its national security, China, much stronger and greater than South Korea, needs to take a more tolerant approach to accommodate Seoul's security concerns. This method seems to be the only way to reach a consensus to identify a joint solution to the nuclear dispute.

In order to carry on its national dream, the power and capabilities that China possesses must be reliable and respected by others. If the conflict is initiated by the Kim regime, North Korea can no longer expect to depend on China and Russia's massive military and economic assistance as in the past. Similarly, China has become South Korea's second largest trade partner, second only to the United States, and China and Russia have strengthened their military ties to safeguard the strategic equilibrium in East Asia. China, which aims for the peaceful rise of one of the greatest powers in the new century, has vowed its continuing commitment to a nuclear-free Korean Peninsula. Beijing has further indicated that it will prioritize avoiding a nuclear and conventional arms race with the United States and its allies.³⁰

A generally accepted framework of the international or regional order by all six powers in which there are two Koreas, China, the U.S., Russia and Japan, may be the path to consensus on the DPRK's nuclear issue. In diplomacy, consensus alludes to an international agreement about the nature of workable arrangements and about the

²⁹ *Union Morning Daily*, October 16, 2016.

³⁰ Wang Li. Op cit.

permissible aims and means of foreign policy. Only in doing so can the leaders and their military advisors of all six powers respond to each other rationally to avoid nuclear escalation in a misperceived world. China, which aims to rise to a great power peacefully and responsibly, must deal with the deployment of THAAD tactfully, appropriately, and rationally.