

Pentagon pressures South Korea to join anti-missile system

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The United States last week stepped up pressure on South Korea to take part in Washington's regional anti-ballistic missile system. The South Korean government has in the past been reluctant to take part, rather focusing on its own indigenous program. The incorporation of South Korea into the existing US partnership on so-called "missile defence" with Japan would further inflame regional tensions.

The *Wall Street Journal* last Tuesday reported that "the US has conducted a site survey in South Korea for possible locations for a Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) ballistic missile system." However, officials told the newspaper that no final decision had been taken.

According to one defense official, Washington could try to convince South Korea to purchase a THAAD system, either directly or by installing it first at a US military base in South Korea and later selling to Seoul. The system is designed to intercept short, medium and intermediate range ballistic missiles up to an altitude of 150 kilometers and comes equipped with the X-band radar system.

The US plans to purchase seven THAAD systems, but as of now, only three are operational. Last year, the US military placed one on Guam, ostensibly in response to the North Korean "threat."

Last Wednesday Admiral James A. Winnefeld, the vice chairman of the Joint Chief of Staffs, delivered a speech to the Atlantic Council, a Washington think tank, on the necessity of US allies such as South Korea acquiring their own anti-missile systems and strengthening regional cooperation.

"Going forward, we will continue to emphasise the importance of developing regional ballistic missile defence systems," he said. "This is a very sensitive topic for several of our regional allies, but progress in

this area would only increase our confidence in the face of persistent North Korean provocations."

While Washington routinely uses North Korea to justify its anti-missile build-up, the real target is China. As part of its "pivot to Asia", the Obama administration is building up military forces and strengthening its alliances throughout the region against China.

Far from being a defensive measure, the Pentagon's placement of anti-ballistic missile systems in Asia is part of its planning for nuclear war with China. US strategists have been seeking "nuclear primacy"—that is, the ability of a US first strike to wipe out China's nuclear arsenal. The US anti-missile systems are to knock out any remaining Chinese missiles.

Beijing has reacted negatively to the prospect of an anti-ballistic missile system in South Korea. Foreign Ministry spokesman Qin Gang declared: "We believe that the deployment of anti-missile systems in this region will not help maintain stability and strategic balance in this region."

Until now, South Korea has been reluctant to join the US missile defence partnership. Instead, it has built its own independent anti-missile system, called the Korean Air and Missile Defense System (KAMD), as well as the "Kill Chain" system, which is designed to carry out pre-emptive strikes on missile launch sites in North Korea. The South Korean KAMD system is designed to intercept short-range missiles that reach altitudes of less than 40 kilometers.

In part, South Korea has maintained its own anti-missile system so as not to alienate China, the country's largest trading partner. At the same time, Seoul is well aware that placing a US anti-ballistic missile system on the peninsula would turn South Korea into a frontline target in the event of war

between the US and China.

Defense Ministry spokesman Kim Min-seok last Thursday denied that Seoul's position on the missile system had changed. "Our Defense Ministry is not aware of the US reviewing deployment of the THAAD system on the Korean Peninsula. The US missile-defense system is a separate system from our Army's KAMD system."

South Korean President Park Geun-hye, however, indicated that she was willing to consider a US request. "If there is a new proposal to be tabled by the US, this is something that could be discussed during talks between our defense ministers," she said.

The US was expected to continue exerting pressure on Seoul during the Asia Security Summit in Singapore this past weekend. On the sidelines of the three-day conference, also known as the Shangri-La Dialogue, US Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel met with his Korean and Japanese counterparts, Kim Kwan-jin and Itsunori Onodera, on Saturday.

The *Wall Street Journal* article indicated that the issue of missile defence would be "high on the agenda," but nothing was announced.

Hagel did secure agreement on military intelligence sharing agreement between the three countries, a longstanding US goal. In 2012, at Washington's insistence, Seoul and Tokyo nearly completed an intelligence sharing agreement, but it was derailed after former South Korean President Lee Myung-bak attempted to push through the deal without consulting the National Assembly. A trilateral memorandum of understanding is expected to be signed in the near future.

Washington has been frustrated by the state of affairs between its two allies. Relations between Seoul and Tokyo have soured in recent years, particularly over a territorial dispute over the Dokdo/Takeshima Islets in the Sea of Japan. Tensions have worsened after the 2012 election of right-wing Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe who has sought to whitewash the war crimes of Japanese imperialism in the 1930s and 1940s in Korea and China.

A senior defense official was quoted in the *Wall Street Journal*'s report saying: "It would be really useful if those nations could set aside their long standing differences. There is enormous utility to having a regionally-knitted together approach to missile

defense."

In March, President Obama personally interceded in the dispute between the two countries and brought President Park and Prime Minister Abe together for the first time on the sidelines of the Nuclear Security Summit in The Hague. Abe, who was elected in December 2012, and Park, who assumed office in February 2013, have yet to propose a bilateral summit.



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