

South Korea pushes for inclusion in US anti-missile system

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20 March 2015

The recent attack on US ambassador to South Korea Mark Lippert by a solitary assailant has provided the South Korean ruling class with the opportunity to throw its weight behind the US and its “pivot to Asia” (see: “US ambassador to South Korea slashed in knife attack”).

After the attack, the ruling Saenuri Party, backed by the media, began to whip up an anti-North Korean, pro-US atmosphere, fearing that the assault on Lippert could damage relations with Washington. In particular, the party has called for the US military’s Thermal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) ballistic missile system to be dispatched to South Korea.

Saenuri Party floor leader Yu Seung-min stated on March 9, “The THAAD system is a matter of national survival—an issue about how we can fend off North Korea’s nuclear attacks and which path we should take as we are put between the US and China.”

The US has been pushing South Korea hard to join its regional anti-missile system along with Japan. While Washington and Tokyo have worked closely together, Seoul has been reluctant, not wanting to upset Beijing. The THAAD is a ground-based system working in conjunction with the X-Band radar, two of which have been placed in Japan. However, in December, Seoul signed up to a trilateral intelligence sharing agreement with Washington and Tokyo that would be essential to a joint anti-missile system.

Until now, the government of President Park Geun-hye has relied on a policy of “strategic ambiguity;” not expressing support for the THAAD’s dispatch to South Korea nor flat out rejecting it. As yet Washington has not made a formal request. While Seoul now has close economic ties to China, it has indicated its support for Washington’s “pivot to Asia” which is aimed at undermining China militarily and economically and

maintaining US hegemony in the Indo-Pacific region.

The US military, however, has been scouting out suitable locations for a THAAD deployment since last May while exerting constant pressure on South Korea. Pentagon press secretary Rear Admiral John Kirby in February stated that there had been “constant discussions” with South Korea over the anti-missile system.

Regardless of the discussions, Seoul has in essence already agreed to host the THAAD system. Last Sunday, a South Korean military official informed the Yonhap News Agency, “The US plans to deploy the [THAAD] in case of an emergency on the Korean Peninsula. My understanding is that THAAD is easily transportable with a US military aircraft.”

While both Washington and Seoul claim that the THAAD is defensive in nature and aimed at countering a North Korean attack, the main target is China. Should the United States launch a nuclear first strike on China, the THAAD would be employed to knock out whatever counterattack Beijing managed to launch. With 28,500 US troops stationed in South Korea, the US ally would quickly be drawn in to any such conflict.

South Korea’s Defense Ministry spokesman Kim Min-seok criticized Beijing on Tuesday saying, “Neighbors can have their own positions on the (possible) deployment of the THAAD system here by the US Forces Korea. But they should not try to influence our security policy.”

Kim’s comments follow several weeks of lobbying by China against the installation of THAAD systems on the Korean Peninsula. China’s Assistant Minister of Foreign Affairs Liu Jianchao was in Seoul on Monday for “very candid and free discussions over the THAAD issue” with his counterpart Lee Gyeong-su. Liu called on South Korea to “[take] account of China’s concerns

and worries.”

Last month, China’s foreign ministry spokesman Hong Lei warned that the THAAD’s deployment to South Korea would undermine the growing relationship between Seoul and Beijing. He stressed that sentiment again on Tuesday, calling on Seoul to be “prudent.”

The US and South Korea are also aware of public opposition to military escalation in the region as well as to the continued US military presence on the Korean Peninsula. Neither wants to stoke public resistance. In 2008 and 2011, mass protests took place against the importation of US beef over fears of mad cow disease and the US-South Korean Free Trade Agreement respectively.

The opposition Democrats, currently calling themselves the New Politics Alliance for Democracy (NPAD), have not opposed the THAAD plans in principle but because antagonizing China cuts across the interests of big business that has connections to the NPAD. The party hopes for closer economic ties with Beijing while often utilizing anti-American and anti-Japanese sentiment to win support.

Senior NPAD lawmaker An Gyu-baek said in a recent interview, “The deployment of THAAD would lead to the formation of two trilateral alliances: South Korea, the US, and Japan in the south and North Korea, Russia, and China in the north. The creation of a new Cold War regime would have a negative influence on the South Korean economy.”

NPAD leader and former presidential candidate Moon Jae-in also met with China’s ambassador to Seoul Qiu Guohong last Friday and stated that Beijing must play an important role in inter-Korean relations.

At the same time, Moon backed the US military presence in the region, claiming that it contributes “to maintaining peace between the two Koreas and maintaining a balance and peace in the entire Northeast Asia region.” Moon made the comments in a meeting with *Financial Times* columnist Gideon Rachman. “The role of US Forces Korea (USFK) must be maintained even after reunification,” he continued.

The Saenuri Party has also stepped up its campaign against opposition parties accusing them of North Korean sympathies. Saenuri Party spokesman Park Dae-chul last week called the NPAD a former “host of pro-North Korean forces” while calling on the party to “write a letter of repentance.” Last December, the

government disbanded the opposition Unified Progressive Party (UPP) using bogus allegations that it had links with North Korea.



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