Chinese-South Korean tensions rise over THAAD anti-missile deployment

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Frictions between China and South Korea are mounting following last month's announcement by Washington and Seoul that the US would deploy an anti-ballistic missile battery to the Korean Peninsula by the end of 2017. The Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system is a key part of the Obama administration's "pivot to Asia" and preparations for war against China.

China's state-run *Global Times*, which has been at the forefront of condemning THAAD and South Korea in recent weeks, published an August 11 editorial reiterating its accusations that Washington and Seoul had pushed Pyongyang into developing nuclear weapons. "North Korea's nuclear ambition was primarily triggered by long-standing military pressures imposed by South Korea and the US," it stated. "The escalating pressures have [produced] bolder nuclear projects. China, being a well-intentioned and responsible mediator, has been paid back by a threatening advanced military system."

These tensions became apparent almost immediately after the formal declaration on THAAD's deployment on July 8. Both China and Russia denounced the decision. Beijing warned earlier in the year that such a decision would have a serious impact on relations with Seoul. On July 25, during a meeting with his South Korean counterpart Yun Byeong-se on the sidelines of the ASEAN Regional Forum, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi said Seoul had "undermined the foundations of trust between the two countries."

In response to Chinese criticism, South Korea's Kim Seong-u, chief presidential secretary for public affairs, stated on August 7: "Chinese media are putting the cart before the horse in insisting that Seoul's decision to deploy the THAAD system in its territory is the cause of Pyongyang's successive ballistic missile launches and other military provocations." He continued: "The fundamental reason for the decision to deploy THAAD lies in the rising nuclear and missile threats from North Korea. If such threats from the North disappear, THAAD won't be needed."

The THAAD system is in fact a crucial part of Washington's "pivot to Asia" and preparations for war with China. The US military buildup in the region includes another THAAD battery in Guam and two related X-band radar systems in Japan. The US also recently announced it was deploying B-1B bombers to Guam. The B1-Bs are faster and can carry more weaponry than the B-52s they are replacing.

This anti-ballistic missile network will also draw Tokyo and Seoul closer together, a longstanding goal of the US. Washington has been concerned by the tensions between its two major allies in North East Asia on historical issues, dating back to the Japanese colonial rule of Korea during the first half of the 20th century.

THAAD consists of interceptor missiles and the AN/TPY-2 X-band radar system. THAAD is designed to locate and knock out incoming missile attacks. The United States intends to use the system to prevent a Chinese counterattack hitting US military bases and other targets if Washington launches a first strike against China.

The system is also connected to the Link 16 intelligence-sharing network, providing intelligence on troop and possible target movements in real-time. In January, Seoul announced it would join Link 16, which includes the US, Japan and NATO countries.

These moves by the US are driving an accelerating arms race in the Asia-Pacific region. North Korea's development of nuclear weapons is itself bound up with internal political pressures created by Washington's isolation of Pyongyang. The Stalinist regime led by

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Kim Jong-un has its weapon programs as the only negotiating chips it can use in order to strike a deal with American imperialism. However, Washington has made clear that any such agreement would be predicated on total capitulation, something which neither Pyongyang nor Beijing is willing to accept.

There are growing concerns that South Korea and Japan may develop their own nuclear bombs. Seoul has sought to develop nuclear weapons at various times, dating back to the regime of military dictator Park Chung-hee, the father of current President Park Geun-hye. Lee Deok-haeng, the director-general for unification policy in Seoul's Ministry of Unification, recently told Fairfax Media that if North Korea continued to develop a nuclear bomb: "It will become a domino effect and even South Korea will become concerned and develop nuclear weapons, and maybe Japan as well."

Both Washington and Seoul have referred to South Korea as a linchpin of the "pivot," exploiting North Korea's bombastic but ultimately empty threats in order to justify expanding their military capabilities and ramping up tensions in the region. When President Park came to office in February 2013, she made clear that her policies would conform to Washington's agenda. Initially, however, she also attempted to draw closer to Beijing, in the hope of winning its support to deal with North Korea and boosting economic relations.

While Washington cautiously allowed its ally to proceed along these lines, Seoul apparently took a step too far last September when Park appeared at a military parade alongside Chinese President Xi Jinping and Russian President Vladimir Putin. Following the parade, in an obvious sign of displeasure, the US turned down several requests for a technology transfer that would allow South Korea to develop its own fighter jets.

Bowing to US pressure, Park reached an agreement last December with Tokyo over Korean "comfort women"—or sex slaves—used by the Japanese military before and during World War II. This signaled a turn by South Korea to more openly fall into line with US interests. Seoul then used North Korea's fourth nuclear weapon test in January as a pretext for entering formal discussions in March on the THAAD deployment.

Drawing closer to Japan in diplomacy as well, Park held her first bilateral meeting with Prime Minister Shinzo Abe last November in Seoul. She is scheduled to travel to Tokyo to meet him again this fall during an annual meeting of Japanese, Chinese and South Korean leaders.

The US and South Korea will conduct their annual Ulchi Freedom Guardian military exercises from August 22 to 25. These war games, which are nominally aimed against Pyongyang, also threaten Beijing. They follow last spring's largest-ever maneuvers between the two countries. The *Korea Times* reported that this month's exercises will focus on striking facilities within North Korea.

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