

South Korea delays THAAD battery installation

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Tensions between the United States and South Korea have begun to appear only one month into the new administration of President Moon Jae-in. Seoul has for the time being suspended the complete rollout of the US Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) battery while it conducts an environmental impact assessment (EIA) on the area surrounding its location. Other signs of conflict are also emerging as Seoul attempts to balance between Washington and Beijing.

On June 5, Moon ordered an EIA in response to confirmation on May 30 that the Defense Ministry had withheld information about the deployment of four additional THAAD launchers. They were waiting to be installed alongside two already set up with the X-band AN/TPY-2 radar on a former golf course in Seongju, North Gyeongsang Province. Seoul has made clear it has no intention of removing these two launchers or the radar.

The Moon administration accused the Defense Ministry of trying to force through the THAAD installation by the end of 2017 under the agreement reached under ousted president Park Geun-hye. The 700,000 square-meter (173 acres) site donated to US Forces Korea has been divided into two sections. The first section, of 328,779 square meters, is just below 330,000 square meters, the maximum limit for a required small-scale EIA. Such an assessment takes six months as opposed to a large-scale EIA, which can take between one and two years.

Moon and the ruling Democratic Party of Korea (DPK) and their allies by no means oppose the US-South Korea military alliance, but have concerns that the US agenda is having a negative impact on South Korean businesses. China has retaliated economically in response to the THAAD installation. South Korean-owned stores in China have been closed. Hyundai

Motors saw a 65 percent fall in Chinese sales in May. The number of Chinese tourists going on shopping trips to Seoul has also fallen, leading to potentially billions of dollars in losses.

Beijing justifiably fears that the US military will use the X-band radar to spy on its territory, obtaining information it could not otherwise acquire in preparation for war. In such an event, THAAD and related anti-ballistic missile systems are designed to knock out a retaliatory nuclear strike by China should the United States carry out a first strike.

The Democrats also envisage turning North Korea into an ultra-cheap labor platform along the lines of the so-called Sunshine Policy implemented by the Kim Dae-jung administration nearly 20 years ago. Under pressure from Washington, however, consecutive conservative presidents have shut down joint economic projects and scrapped plans for additional collaboration.

Moon and the DPK are not opposed to war nor are they attempting to build an anti-war movement; far from it. The Democrats are obscuring the real danger of such a conflict between the US and its allies, including South Korea, on one side and North Korea and China on the other. By carrying out the EIA, as well as calling for THAAD's confirmation by the National Assembly, Moon is attempting to dress up the THAAD deployment with an air of "procedural legitimacy" in order to sell it to the South Korean people. The government also hopes that the delay in the full rollout will buy time to negotiate with China.

However, the United States is unwilling to accept any accommodation to Beijing, especially as the Trump administration ratchets up its war rhetoric against North Korea. Thomas Karako, of the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), which has close ties to the Pentagon, blamed China for the tensions in the region.

He stated: “China’s playing a very dangerous game using North Korea to drive a wedge between the US and South Korea.”

In order to deflect criticism, Jeong Ui-yong, chief of the National Security Office at Cheongwadae (South Korea’s presidential residence) said on June 9: “The government has no intention to make fundamental changes to the content of our agreements made in terms of the South Korea-US alliance.” This is an indication that Seoul intends to go through with the THAAD deployment after the EIA.

Jeong continued to push the lie that the US ballistic missile system is defensive in nature: “The decision to deploy THAAD was made in order to protect South Korea and the US Forces Korea from a mounting threat from North Korea, so the decision will not be thought of lightly just because of an administration change. We will continue to consult closely with the US.”

South Korean Defense Minister Han Min-gu also held bilateral discussions with US Defense Secretary James Mattis on June 3 in Singapore during the Shangri-La Dialogue. Han, after coordinating with Cheongwadae, attempted to reassure his US counterpart that investigations into the Defense Ministry’s omission on key parts of the THAAD deployment were “fully domestic measures and not an attempt to change the current decision or send a different message to the US.”

Mattis apparently told Han he “understood and trusted” Seoul’s position, but later commented to reporters that North Korea was a “real problem” and reiterated the line that THAAD is meant to defend the South from the North’s potential nuclear attacks.

The apparent foot-dragging is not sitting well in Washington. Both Republican and Democratic Party lawmakers in Washington expressed their displeasure with Seoul’s decision. House Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Ed Royce, a Republican, called for a “quick and thorough [environmental] review” in order to continue with THAAD’s deployment.

Senator Dick Durbin, the Democratic Party whip, expressed more clearly the concerns that Seoul is moving toward Beijing while expressing disdain for Moon’s delay: “It’s my fear that [Moon] thinks—I hope I’m wrong—that South Korea has a better chance working with China to contain North Korea than working with the United States.”

Durbin also echoed President Donald Trump’s assertions that US allies are not paying their fair share of military costs. “I can’t understand the delay, why they even need to vote on it ... it’s \$900 million-plus from the United States we’re spending to put this in place and then to maintain it,” he said. “So, I mean, from where I’m sitting, it’s a pretty good deal for the South Koreans.”

Other issues causing concern in Washington have also come up, including South Korea’s relationship with Japan, an integral part of the US anti-ballistic missile system. Moon’s nominee for foreign minister, Gang Gyeong-hwa has said she intends to revive discussions over Japan’s use of sex slaves during World War II, a large number of whom were Korean—a move that would raise tensions between the two countries. An agreement was reached in December 2015 between Tokyo and Seoul on the issue at the behest of the US.



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