

THAAD Will Not Protect South Korea

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Elderly women held up signs reading “Illegal THAAD, back to the U.S!” as they marched, leaning on walking frames for support.

Soseong-ri, their small village in South Korea, has become the center of a fight that could lay the groundwork for U.S.-Korean relations under Seoul’s next government. On Mar. 18, 5,000 people from across South Korea [gathered in the village](#) to protest the controversial deployment of the U.S.’s Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) anti-missile system.

In July 2016, the US and South Korean governments announced plans to deploy the THAAD system in Seongju County, North Gyeongsang Province. But due to staunch opposition from local residents, the location was revised to a nearby golf course owned by the South Korean corporation Lotte, nestled between Soseong-ri in Seongju County and the city of Gimcheon.

Since Lotte handed its land over to the South Korean Ministry of National Defense on Feb. 27, Soseong-ri, just three kilometers from the golf course, has become the front line in the fight against the missile system. The deployment has already begun and the South’s defense ministry will soon transfer the land to United States Forces Korea (USFK).

Residents of Seongju and nearby Gimcheon have vowed to reverse the deployment.

A “Peace Walk” in opposition to THAAD took place near the former Lotte Skyhill Seongju Country Club, the missile deployment site, on Mar. 18.

Missile Defense Is No Defense

THAAD, made by the U.S. weapons firm Lockheed Martin, stands for Terminal High Altitude Area Defense. It consists of a radar, used to surveil the missile activity of so-called enemy countries and detect incoming missiles, and interceptor missiles, which — in theory — can be launched to shoot down incoming missiles in mid-air.

The THAAD deployment in South Korea is supposed to counter threats from the North, but it is not unique. The U.S. has missile defense systems installed all over the world, mainly in Eastern Europe and Asia, and it is clear from their locations that their deployments are aimed at creating a network surrounding China and Russia.

If two adversarial countries have nuclear weapons, neither will attack the other, because it fears retaliation in the form of a nuclear counter-attack. Picture two people holding guns to each others’ heads. If one shoots first, the other will shoot back, and vice versa. The result is a perpetual standoff. This is known as mutually assured destruction, and proved an effective form of deterrence between the Soviet Union and the United States during the Cold War.

But to return to our analogy: If one gunman renders the other unable to fire, nothing deters him from pulling the trigger of his own gun. This is the ultimate aim of missile defense — to gain first strike advantage by removing the enemy’s ability to retaliate.

U.S. missile defense systems are dangerous precisely because they enable a preemptive nuclear strike. This is why some argue that such systems are, in fact, offensive. It is also why, in 1972, the US and the Soviet Union signed the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty (ABM Treaty), which limited the development of missile defense systems by both countries. But in 2002, after thirty years of relative stability guaranteed by mutually assured destruction, former U.S. President George W Bush walked away from the ABM Treaty.

Ray McGovern, a former CIA analyst turned antiwar activist who was present at the signing of the ABM Treaty, said:

When president Bush came into office, he said, ‘I’m getting out of the ABM Treaty.’ That was a key moment in the strategic equation, because the ABM Treaty was the main source of strategic stability.

China, Russia and North Korea have all declared a policy of no first use, i.e. they will not use their nuclear weapons offensively, but the US has not done the same and reserves the right of preemptive strike.

No Protection for South Korea

According to JJ Suh, professor of Politics and International Affairs at International Christian University in Japan, the aim of the THAAD deployment in Seongju is not to protect South Korean citizens at all:

“This system is designed to work at higher altitudes, higher than 45 kilometers. But most North Korean missiles [that would be used against South Korea] are short-range missiles that would fly below 45 kilometers.”

The THAAD system, Suh said, serves U.S. strategic interests in the region: It can be... deployed against intermediate-range missiles from North Korea targeting Okinawa... or Guam. And so, it’s more plausible that the U.S. military wants to deploy the THAAD system in South Korea to protect [U.S.] soldiers and military assets in the region, rather than South Koreans in South Korea.

The THAAD radar, if stationed in South Korea, would also significantly expand the U.S.’s field of vision for spying on Chinese missile activity. For this reason, China has been staunchly opposed to the system’s deployment in South Korea.

But the South Korean people may pay a steep price for hosting THAAD, warned missile defense expert and MIT professor Ted Postol. The system, he says, will put South Korea in the path of a potential conflict between the U.S. and China. In the event of a confrontation between these two superpowers, says, China’s first target for a nuclear strike could be the THAAD radar in Seongju.

Costly but Ineffective

Postol also notes the THAAD system has not been proven to work.

“The infrared seeker on THAAD interceptors is easily fooled by decoys,” [he said](#).

An enemy can launch several fake missiles along with the real one; they would shoot out in different directions to confuse the THAAD system, which would then have a hard time discerning and honing in on the real missile. According to Postol:

The infrared seeker on a THAAD interceptor cannot determine the distance from the target, and the THAAD radar cannot determine the precise azimuth of the target even if the decoys are only about 100 meters away from the real warhead.

Philip Coyle, Senior Science Fellow at the Center for Arms Control and Non-proliferation, [concurred](#).

“After a very poor record with six test failures in a row in the 1990s, THAAD has successfully intercepted its targets in [11 out of 11 tests](#) since 2006, but these tests are highly scripted to maximize the system’s chance of success.” And there is the problem of countering more than two projectiles. “We don’t know whether THAAD can intercept three incoming missiles, let alone hundreds,” he concludes.

Furthermore, according to Coyle, THAAD has blind spots. Its radar can only cover 120 degrees at a time, so North Korea could circumvent the system by launching a submarine-launched ballistic missile (SLBM) from any point not covered by the radar.

Yet U.S. and South Korean taxpayers will end up paying for this system. One THAAD unit costs 1.3 billion U.S. dollars to produce. Then there is also the annual operation cost, which amounts to 22 million U.S. dollars. Neither the South Korean nor the U.S. government has said who will foot that bill, and the South’s Ministry of National Defense declined to tell Korea Exposé the total cost of THAAD deployment in Seongju, saying,

“The numbers aren’t public.”

The Fight to Oppose THAAD

Seongju is a small agricultural region of mostly elderly farmers, who had voted all their lives for the conservative party and had been staunch supporters of recently-impeached Park Geun-hye. When the government announced Seongju as the deployment site without any warning or consultation, they felt shocked and betrayed. Seongju resident Lee Hae-kyung said:

There are children here, there are schools here. Why do they have to put it here? There was no explanation from the government...They just suddenly announced they would put it here.

The people at the forefront of this fight are ordinary farmers, mostly women, who have never led rallies or protested government policies. They demanded the deployment decision be rescinded, and pro-government media were quick to label them North Korean sympathizers and paid outside agitators.

The government's complete disregard for citizens' concerns was what initially prompted so many of the residents to join the protests. But they also became worried about the potentially harmful effects of the electromagnetic radiation emitted by the THAAD radar on their health and crops.

Even after the government changed the deployment site to the Lotte golf course, Seongju residents made clear that they were not just fighting to keep it out of their backyard but to oppose its deployment anywhere. They are joined by the residents of Gimcheon City, which lies next to the golf course, as well as the clergy of Won Buddhism — one of whose holy sites is nearby — and a national task force composed of peace, antiwar and other civic organizations.

Yoon Geum-soon, a resident of Seongju and the former national chairperson of the Korean Women Peasants Association, says the fight against THAAD is a fight to end the U.S.' hold over South Korea's foreign policy:

For over 60 years, the so-called US-ROK alliance has been based on our subordination. As long as our country does not have the autonomy to pursue its own foreign policy, the regional conflict will only worsen and we will suffer for it. We have no choice but to end this cycle.

This article was written by Julian Cho and Hyun Lee. They are staff writers at [ZoominKorea](#), an online resource on democracy and peace in Korea.

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