

The Korean Crisis and the THAAD Missile Deployment: A Growing Tinderbox in the South

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As the first military hardware associated with the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense, commonly called THAAD, arrives in the southern region of the Korean Peninsula, the tensions around and within the region seem to be escalating. A number of ongoing crises in South Korea are starting to take their toll, and could have regional and global implications.

The most prominent source of tension is the new missile system being erected in cooperation with the United States. The narrative in US media surrounding THAAD is that the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, smeared as "the crazy North Koreans," are threatening to destroy the Republic of Korea located in the south. The new missile system is said to simply be a mechanism for protecting a vulnerable, democratic US ally, that faces being wiped out. Mark Toner of the US State Department described the erection of THAAD as "frankly a response to a [threat](#)."

Who is mad about THAAD? And Why?

Objections to THAAD are not only coming from Pyongyang. Moscow and Beijing have both spoken up against the new missile system for reasons that are routinely ignored in US media discourse.

South Korea is hardly unprotected and alone. The United States already has 28,500 troops in [South Korea](#). It also has F-16 fighter aircraft and A-10 bomber jets. South Korea's military is also very well stocked, with F-35 Fighter Jets, Aegis Destroyers, and all kinds of military hardware purchased from the United States.

The THAAD missile system being erected in a contract with Lockheed-Martin, in cold war terms, is a "strike enabling system." Once the system is completed, the US and South Korean forces that are already in the Peninsula are free to launch an attack on North Korea, China, or Russia. The THAAD system, modeled after Israel's Iron Dome, would prevent retaliation strikes aimed at disabling the attackers. THAAD enables the US and South Korea to begin striking countries in the region, while shielding themselves from any response. Furthermore, THAAD includes a radar system that will closely monitor regional activity, not only in North Korea, but also in northern China.

Its not hard to tell why Russia and China are loudly objecting to this multi-billion dollar military project. Strike enabling systems with penetrating radars are not a mechanism of defusing tension, in an already tense region. THAAD is the latest development in the Pentagon's ongoing "Asian Pivot," moving forces into the Pacific. Similar moves have already escalated tensions in the South China Sea.

US media's justification for the project depends on a false, racist and cartoonish caricature of the DPRK. Fictional Hollywood movies, disproven news items about executions by wild dogs, and endless rumor mongering have all painted a picture of DPRK's leadership as a group of people hell bent on nuclear war. In reality, the government in the north has frequently stated that its goal is peaceful, democratic re-unification of the peninsula, not war, death, and destruction.

Dissent, Repression & Democracy

At the same time this controversial and provocative missile system is being erected, the President of the Republic of Korea is facing impeachment. Park Geun-hye has had her power suspended as the country prepares for an impeachment trial. Park has been caught taking bribes, and giving favors to members of the corporate elite. Lee Jae-yong, described as the de-facto leader of the multinational electronics conglomerate known as Samsung is facing criminal charges for his illicit dealings with President Park.

Lee Jae-myung, a left-wing populist, is growing in popularity. Lee's political career has been closely identified with expanding the social safety net and workplace protections. Lee is also a loud opponent of THAAD. Lee's voice joins a chorus of Korean activists who have filled the streets protesting against the ongoing presence of US troops and the installation of the new missile system. The large anti-US, left-wing activist movement among Koreans, which made global headlines in prior decades has not gone away. It persists among young and old Koreans, despite the heavy restrictions on its activity and constant repression.

Global media has dubbed Lee Jae-myung as "the Bernie Sanders" of South Korea. However, there is one key difference between Lee and Sanders. Sanders identifies himself as a "Democratic Socialist." Lee does not use such terms to describe himself, as doing so is illegal under the National Security Laws. While millions of Koreans living in the south identify with organized labor, anti-capitalism, socialism, and other radical left-wing ideas, their ability to express themselves is tightly restricted.

The slightest criticism of capitalism, discussions of the history of the Korean War, or statements in any way perceived as being supportive of their northern countryfolk can land citizens of South Korea in prison. The National Security Laws of South Korea are condemned by Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and many international [bodies](#). A 24 year old photographer and activist named Park Jung-geun was convicted and given a 10-month suspended sentence simply for sarcastically tweeting the phrase "Long Live Kim Jong-Il" in [2012](#).

The Unified Progressive Party, a dissident voice in Korean politics, has been outlawed. The leaders of the party were imprisoned after an audio recording surfaced. The crime for which party leaders were sentenced to decades in prison was a hypothetical conversation about what to do in the context all out war [between](#) the North and South.

While the US media's narrative ignores it, for the majority of the years following the country's division in 1945, the southern half of the Korean peninsula has hardly been democratic. Military dictators like Sygman Rhee ruled with an iron fist. The scandal ridden President who faces a pending impeachment trial is herself the daughter of Park Chung-Hee, the military dictator who ruled the country until his assassination in 1979.

The current President's father not only brutally repressed labor unions and dissident

students, but also slaughtered thousands of Koreans simply for being homeless. In 1975, Hee issued an order for the police to remove all homeless people from the capital city of Seoul. Koreans determined by the police to be vagrants were placed in a network of 36 different prison camps throughout the country, and forced to work long hours. Torture was routinely utilized in these camps, and an unknown number died. While US media endlessly hypes up unsubstantiated claims about “labor camps” in the North, often coming from defectors with clear incentives to exaggerate, the reality of labor camps under the US backed regime in the south, and the thousands who died after being worked to death in them, has been largely glossed [over](#).

What Role Will South Korea Play?

China hasn't simply objected to THAAD with words. Chinese corporations are tightly controlled by the Communist Party, and their activities fit in with the country's five year development plan. International observers have often commented on the Chinese governments ability to cooperate with the private sector in order to serve geopolitical goals. An undeclared boycott of South Korea is now being carried out by Chinese businesses.

China's tourism websites have stopped booking packages in South Korea, which has been a popular destination for Chinese tourists in recent [years](#). The Japanese-Korean conglomerate known as Lotte has also faced a sudden loss of Chinese business. 23 Lotte owned stores in China have been closed [own](#). South Korean music and TV programs have been blocked from web-streaming services on the Chinese [mainland](#). As China cuts off a large amount of its business dealings with South Korea, critics of Beijing are calling these measures “unofficial sanctions” in retaliation for THAAD.

During his Presidential campaign, Donald Trump questioned the US relationship with South Korea, saying “We are better off frankly if South Korea is going to start protecting itself ... they have to protect themselves or they have to pay [us](#).”

Though Lee Jae-myung is a leftist, and Trump is identified with the extreme right wing in the United States, on this issue, they seem to agree. Lee is quoted as saying “Americans impeached their establishment by electing Trump... Our elections will do the [same](#).”

Lee Jae-myung, who wants to US military presence scaled back, is one of the “big three” expected to run in the upcoming Presidential election. More and more Koreans agree with his argument that allying with the United States against the north, China, and Russia, is not in the people's best interest. Furthermore, less than 4% of the population stands behind the disgraced President. South Korea could soon be moving in the same direction as the Philippines, where the long standing neoliberal, pro-American status quo was shaken up by the election of Rodrigo Duterte.

With the THAAD controversy boiling, amid bribery scandals, impeachment proceedings, discontent with the status quo, and renewed tensions with the North, the southern half of the Korean peninsula is gradually becoming more and more of a global hotspot. The point of disagreement seems to be about the role southern Korean will play in the world. Will it remain an extension of US influence in Asia, or will the southern half of the Korean peninsula follow in the footsteps of its powerful Chinese neighbors and northern countryfolk? Will Koreans in the south declare their economic, political, and military independence from the United States and Japan?

These questions, which have driven so many uprisings, protests, military coups, and strikes since 1945 are not going away any time soon.

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