

The South Korea Protest Movement against the THAAD Missile System. “Seongju is Korea and Korea is Seongju”

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Global Research, August 20, 2016

[Zoom in Korea](#) 19 August 2016

Region: [Asia](#)

Theme: [Media Disinformation](#)

On August 15 in Seongju, North Gyeongsang Province, 908 people sat in rows of chairs and waited for their heads to be shaved as an act of protest against the U.S.-South Korean decision to deploy the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) missile defense system in their hometown. Even Confucian scholars, who regard all parts of the human body as a gift from one’s parents and their hair as precious as their lives, sat stoically, willing to join the symbolic act against the deployment of the controversial weapons system. As the ceremony began and clumps of hair fell to the ground, onlookers gasped and even dabbed tears from their cheeks.

But the moment of anguish was brief. As soon as the ceremony concluded, everyone quietly tied their headbands behinds their heads and shouted “No THAAD!” as they headed to a demonstration.

Petition to White House Surpasses 100,000

Since a U.S. and South Korean joint working group announced the small agricultural town of Seongju as the designated site for THAAD deployment on July 13, the people of Seongju, mostly melon farmers, have become the front line in the fight against missile defense in Korea. And in just a few weeks, they have organized themselves into a force to be reckoned with.

The online “We the People” [petition against THAAD deployment](#) surpassed its goal of 100,000 signatures on August 10. The Seongju residents gathered for their 29th nightly candlelight vigil that evening were beaming with joy. The emcee shouted, “What day is today?” and the residents shouted back in unison, “The day we reached 100,000!” According to the White House petition website, any petition that garners 100,000 signatures in 30 days triggers an official response from the White House within 60 days of the date that the goal is reached.

To be sure, waging an online petition campaign in Seongju was no easy task. Most residents don’t have computers nor read English. The petition requires an email verification step, but most didn’t have email accounts. College students set up booths at the nightly candlelight vigils and patiently helped older residents through the process, starting with opening an email account.



The residents made clear that they are not appealing for sympathy from the White House. The petition campaign was a process of organizing the entire country beyond Seongju to demand that the United States rescind its THAAD decision and exert pressure on the White House.

“Until when do we hold the rain ceremony?” asked Lee Jae-dong, the chair of the Seongju branch of the Korean Peasants League and the emcee of the nightly candlelight vigils. “Until it rains!” replied the crowd. “Until when do we fight THAAD deployment?” he asked. “Until it’s rescinded!” replied Seongju residents in unison.

Defending Seongju for Future Generations

✘ Defense Minister Han Min-koo must not have read the Seongju residents’ resolution released on August 15. Had he read it, he would have known better than to try to appease the Seongju residents with offers to discuss a new site for the THAAD deployment. In the collective declaration, the Seongju residents remembered the struggle of their ancestors against Japanese occupation and vowed to pass down a land of peace to their next generation -

In 1905, the Japanese colonizers opened the Seoul-Busan railway. Colonial Japan used the railway as a transport line to expropriate materials from Joseon, and wherever the railway passed, traditional societies collapsed. With the same sense of urgency as we feel today, countless Seongju residents, including Confucian scholars, stood up and ultimately defended their hometown from foreign imperialists.

Today, the residents of Seongju face yet another challenge from foreigners. The foreign power that our ancestors faced was not easier than what we face today. Our forebears did not kneel or retreat in the face of the terrifying might of the foreign power and defended their hometown. We are the residents of that land that our forebears defended and their proud descendants. We have a duty to defend this precious land and pass it down to our future generations.

We cannot give Seongsan, the sacred land of Seongju, to be forever used as a military base by foreigners. Nor can we pass down the disgraceful THAAD to our children. Just as our forebears did, we will defend Seongsan and Seongju even if it means putting our lives on the line. We will stop the THAAD deployment, make Seongsan a symbol of peace and proudly pass it down to our future generations.

THAAD Fight Calls into Question US-ROK Alliance

As the THAAD fight wages on, scholars and lawmakers are openly raising questions about the uneven nature of the U.S.-South Korean alliance. At a forum at Yonsei University on August 18, Professor Lee Nam-ju of Sungkonghoe University warned that a regional arms race and military confrontation could become unavoidable if China considers South Korea the key cause of a strategic threat.

“Pointing to the so-called Iranian threat, the United States tried to construct missile defense in Eastern Europe, and this became the cause of marked deterioration in relations between Europe and Russia. That should be a lesson to us,” Lee said. “The attitude that we have no choice but to accept all the negative side-effects of the THAAD deployment decision in the interest of the US-ROK alliance is the ultimate obstacle in the THAAD fight,” he added, “The THAAD issue begs the question - should the US-ROK alliance always be considered

unconditional?”

Representative Seol Hun of the Minjoo Party agreed. “Until now, anything carried out in the name of the US-ROK alliance was given an automatic green light,” he said, “But the THAAD issue clearly demonstrates that U.S. and South Korean interests are not always aligned.”

The scholars and lawmakers at the forum also agreed that the decision to deploy the THAAD system in Korea should go through a ratification process in the National Assembly.

Professor Song Gi-chun of the North Jeolla University School of Law denounced the Park Geun-hye administration for railroading a unilateral decision without the consent of the National Assembly and refuted the administration’s argument that the Mutual Defense Treaty between the United States and South Korea gave it the right to do so. Song referenced article 60 of the South Korean constitution, which states that the National Assembly has the right to “consent to the conclusion and ratification of treaties pertaining to mutual assistance or mutual security” and “treaties which would incur grave financial burden on the state or people,” and argued that the THAAD deployment decision needs to be ratified by the National Assembly.

“The THAAD deployment decision is an agreement between two countries that would significantly transform the security environment of South Korea,” Song noted, “It goes beyond the framework of the Mutual Defense Treaty and is an agreement of serious import that will cause fissures in the balance of military powers in the Northeast Asian region. An agreement that goes beyond the framework of the existing treaty and outlines new rights and responsibilities between countries should, of course, be approved by the National Assembly.”

People’s Party Representative Choi Gyeong-hwan, who served as the last secretary to the late President Kim Dae-jung, agreed. “Through a ratification process in the National Assembly, we have to empower the Assembly to oversee military matters,” he said and committed to do all he can in the National Assembly to oppose the THAAD deployment, including calling for a ratification process and the impeachment of the Defense Minister, as well as creating a special committee of all opposition parties.

Seongju is Korea and Korea is Seongju

As the fight against THAAD enters its sixth week, Seongju residents are appealing for candlelight vigils around the country to oppose the THAAD deployment. “You don’t have to come to Seongju to give us support,” said Park Su-gyu, the publicity coordinator for the Seongju Task Force, “We, the residents of Seongju, will defend Seongju. You can raise your candles wherever you are. Whether it’s three people or five people, raise your candles. That way, we can be unified in the fight to stop the THAAD system from being deployed anywhere in Korea.”

145 civil society organizations came together on August 18 to form the National Action to Oppose THAAD Deployment in Korea and announced plans to answer Seongju’s call. It plans to hold simultaneous candlelight vigils in 50 cities around the country on August 26, which marks the 50th nightly candlelight vigil in Seongju, then 100 cities on October 20, the 100th candlelight vigil in Seongju. The newly formed coalition embraced the slogan that has become the battle cry of the anti-THAAD struggle - “Seongju is Korea and Korea is Seongju.”

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