

Threat to China: Pressure on South Korea to Join U.S. Anti-Ballistic Missile Defense System

By [Gregory Elich](#)

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In recent months, the Obama Administration has been intensifying pressure on South Korea to join its anti-ballistic missile defense system. As the United States expands that system across the Asia-Pacific as one component of its military buildup under the rubric of the Asia Pivot, Seoul is seen as having a key role to play.

The United States has posted anti-ballistic missile defense units in Eastern Europe and Turkey, and NATO membership has been extended to former Warsaw Pact countries, in an effort to tighten the military noose around Russia. The aim of the Asia Pivot is to adopt the same aggressive posture towards China and North Korea.

South Korea is building its own separate anti-missile system, structured for the defense of its own territory. That system is comprised of Patriot PAC-2 batteries, which are slated for replacement by the PAC-3. South Korea also plans to develop its own higher altitude anti-ballistic missiles.

The United States has wider ambitions when it comes to ballistic missile defense in South Korea. The goal is to integrate South Korea into the steadily expanding U.S. missile defense system in the Asia Pacific.

The United States is giving serious consideration to deploying a Terminal High-Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) battery in South Korea, a system that is capable of targeting short to intermediate-range ballistic missiles.

In any conflict with North Korea, the main risk to U.S. forces stationed on the peninsula would come from long-range artillery and cruise missiles. U.S. bases in Korea are scheduled to be relocated farther south by 2016, out of range of North Korean artillery. South Korea's Patriot batteries are reasonably effective at countering short-range ballistic missiles. The deployment of a THAAD battery would provide an extra layer of defense, as incoming high altitude missiles could be targeted at an earlier point in their descent, with Patriot batteries acting as a backup for any missed targets.

A THAD battery is armed with 24 missiles, so unless the U.S launches a first strike on North Korea, a sizeable enough attack would soon exhaust its arsenal.

None of this matters much, as the primary motivation for installing a THAAD battery in South Korea would be to take advantage of its accompanying AN/TPY-2 X-band radar. Although deployed as part of a THAAD battery, the radar can also operate independently. The most effective approach in countering long-range ballistic missiles is to detect their launch as close to the source as possible. The AN/TPY-2 radar can be integrated into a wider

missile defense system, passing tracking information to U.S. and Japanese ships armed with Aegis anti-ballistic missiles and to ground-based anti-ballistic missile systems stationed on U.S. territory.

No radar can see over the earth's curvature, so to be effective the wider the area in which radar stations are dispersed, the more chance of success in shooting down a ballistic missile. The U.S. has ground-based interceptors stationed in Alaska and a THAAD battery in Guam. An X-band radar has been placed in northern Japan, and second radar is scheduled for southern Japan by the end of the year. Another site under consideration is the Philippines. Placement of an AN/TPY-2 radar in South Korea would provide detection capability extending across much of eastern China.

The AN/TPY-2 radar can operate in two modes. In terminal mode, it feeds the THAAD battery, allowing it to target an incoming ballistic missile as it descends towards its target. In forward-based mode, it tracks missiles during their boost phase and feeds tracking information to the wider missile defense system. Those feeds can be linked to anti-missile systems thousands of miles away.

Any anti-missile system can be quickly overwhelmed by a full-scale launch by an enemy. The primary purpose of the system is to provide first-strike capability, in which enemy ballistic missiles could be taken out, and the anti-missile system would counter the response by the relatively few ballistic missiles that managed to survive the attack.

It takes only eight hours to switch from one mode of the AN/TPY-2 radar to the other, and radar stationed in South Korea would grant the United States more strategic flexibility. If the U.S. wanted to confront North Korea, the radar would be set to terminal mode. In seeking confrontation with China, it would be set to forward-based mode.

The U.S. military regards it a high priority to bring a THAAD battery to South Korea, and accordingly, it has already conducted a site survey to identify potential locations. Last October, South Korea and the United States signed an agreement that called for South Korea to "further the interoperability" of its anti-missile system with that of the U.S. The time has come, U.S. officials say, for South Korea to move beyond interoperability to integration.

Given the proximity of North Korea, a THAAD battery would make little sense from the South Korean perspective. As one Korean official explained on condition of anonymity, "In an environment like the Korean Peninsula where firing ranges are so short, the most effective missile defense system is low-altitude defense. We're not participating in any system for high-altitude defense."

Nor would a high-altitude ballistic missile be North Korea's first weapon of choice, when low or medium-altitude missiles would be airborne for a far shorter period, thus making them more difficult to shoot down. A THAAD battery in South Korea, however, would make an inviting target for Chinese missiles in any conflict between the United States and China.

U.S. officials are urging South Korea to purchase a THAAD system, at the cost of nearly one billion dollars. Some American officials have indicated that if South Korea continues to balk, the U.S. could unilaterally move a system there, and once in place, pressure South Korea to purchase it. The Asia Pivot's cost for militarizing the region is likely to be enormous, and the U.S. is seeking to offload as much of the expense as possible onto the shoulders of nations

that have little or nothing to gain from it. In line with that policy, the U.S. has already persuaded South Korea to pay an additional \$880 million per year for American bases, an increase of six percent over the amount Seoul had been providing to the U.S.

U.S. officials pressed their case to their South Korean counterparts at the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore on May 30-June 1. Among the main conference sponsors were Lockheed Martin, Boeing, Northrop Grumman, BAE Systems, and Airbus Group. The conference is as much about arms sales as it is in pushing U.S. geopolitical goals.

Military contractors accompanied the U.S. government delegation, with an eye to netting new customers. Representatives from Lockheed Martin, contractor for the THAAD, joined U.S. officials in meetings with South Korean representatives.

At the conference, Washington succeeded in winning agreement from South Korea and Japan to share intelligence on North Korean missiles, and American officials regarded this as only the first step toward the integration of the two nations into the U.S. missile defense system. A Pentagon official commented, "That makes sense, you know, for where they sit right now, but the key is to get it interoperable and integrated into one system that is effective as possible."

Ultimately, it may matter little what South Koreans want. The United States is committed to drawing South Korea into its missile defense system. Pentagon officials claim that the South Korean military is analyzing which high altitude anti-ballistic missile system to adopt. "They've made no national decision to this point," said Peppino DeBiaso, director of missile defense policy at the Pentagon, so the U.S. is "trying to help" the South Koreans "reach a decision about the capabilities they would have." It is probable that this "help" is correctly perceived as pressure by those on the receiving end.

General Curtis Scaparrotti, commander of United States Forces Korea, remarked, "There was consideration being taken in order to consider THAAD being deployed here in Korea. It is a U.S. initiative, and in fact, I recommended it as the commander." Speaking on condition of anonymity, a Pentagon official admitted that a THAAD battery is not necessary for South Korea. "But it would obviously help the defense of the United States. An alliance requires reciprocity."

The Obama Administration attaches such importance to the issue that it nominated Mark Lippert to be its next ambassador to South Korea. Lippert is currently special assistant to Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel, and one of his main areas of focus has been the U.S. anti-missile system.

China is South Korea's top trading partner, so there is a solid basis for Seoul's disinclination to antagonize the Chinese by binding itself to the U.S. anti-missile system. The United States, though, wields enormous power and has varied means of persuading recalcitrant partners to serve its needs. The U.S. military is not accustomed to being told 'no', and pressure on the South Koreans is not likely to relent unless they acquiesce.

Gregory Elich is on the Board of Directors of the Jasenovac Research Institute and on the Advisory Board of the Korea Policy Institute. He was a member of the collective that wrote [The Murder of Democracy: CIA and Pentagon Operations in the Post-Soviet Period](#), published in the Russian language.

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