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Issue Brief

Politics of Deployment of Terminal High Altitude Area Defense System (THAAD) in South Korea

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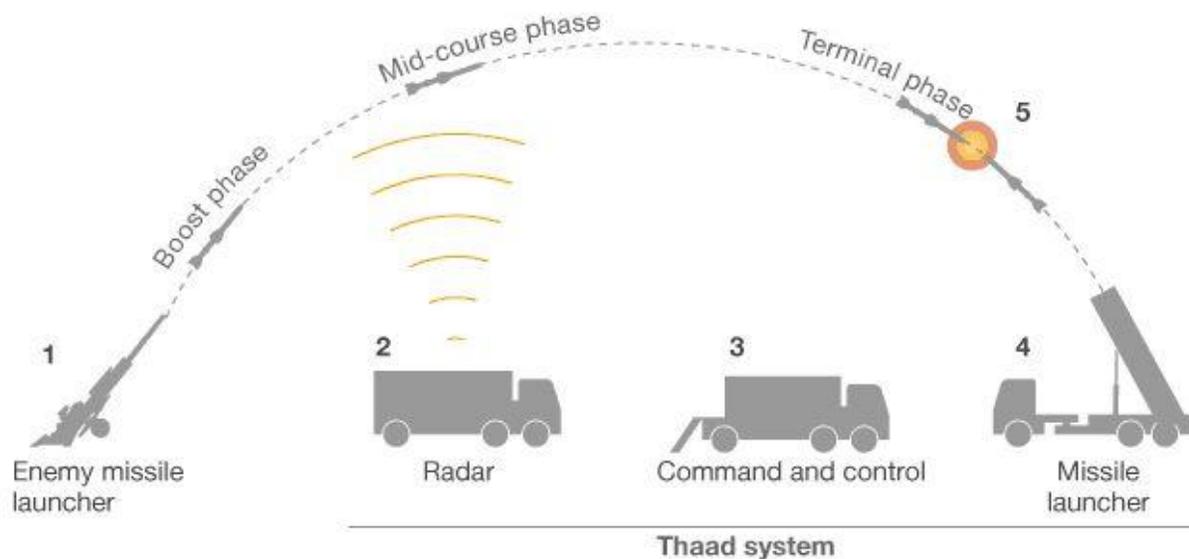
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South Korea has deployed a controversial missile defence system, the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense System (THAAD) with the help of the US. The system reportedly became operational in early May 2017. South Korea and the US have claimed that this is meant to protect against missile threats from North Korea. However, China has vehemently voiced opposition to the system saying that the system is actually meant for spying on its territory. Relations between Seoul and Beijing have rapidly deteriorated over the issue.

What exactly is the THAAD?

THAAD is a missile defence system that is capable of shooting down short and medium-range ballistic missiles in the terminal phase of their flight. It uses hit-to-kill technology (i.e uses kinetic energy to destroy incoming missile). It has a 200 km range and can reach altitude of 150 km.¹The US has already deployed the system in Guam and Hawaii as a measure against potential attacks from North Korea. Reportedly, the system is highly accurate.

How the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense System (Thaad) works



Source: Federation of American Scientists, US Department of Defense

¹ "Thaad: US begins deploying missile defence system in South Korea," *BBC News*, March 7, 2017.

Once the enemy launches a missile, the radar system detects the launch and transfers the information to the command and control, which then sends instructions for the launch of an interceptor missile. The interceptor missile is then fired at the enemy projectile which is destroyed in the terminal phase of flight. The launcher track can hold multiple interceptor missiles.

However, there has been opposition to the deployment of the THAAD system - both from within South Korea and internationally, especially from China. South Koreans have environmental concerns, as well as concerns that the deployment would have economic fall-out. Others believe that the defence system will itself become a target, endangering people who live around the military sites. There have been multiple anti-THAAD demonstrations so far.

Internationally, both China and Russia have raised concerns that the system would affect the regional security balance. China adamantly opposes the deployment of THAAD, seeing the system as a threat to its military capabilities. China's foreign ministry spokesperson, Geng Shuang said on May 2, 2017 "China calls for an immediate stop to the THAAD deployment on the Korean Peninsula." Earlier in March 2017, Mr. Shuang said China opposed the deployment and would "resolutely take necessary measures to defend our own security interests".²

China's primary concern center around THAAD's radar system which could potentially help the US to better detect any missiles China may launch in a future warfare scenario. The US ability to detect incoming missiles early would provide it an edge. The Chinese military, on the other hand, cannot put radars anywhere close to the US to help detect incoming US missiles. In essence, this would mean that the US would have a slight strategic advantage in a nuclear conflict. Also, the THAAD radar would be able to look into Chinese territory since the missile defence system is supposed to be geared against North Korean missiles and China shares border with North Korea.

China has rigorously objected to the deployment of the THAAD system in its immediate neighbourhood, saying it would destabilize the regional security balance and would do little to curb the threat posed by North Korea's nuclear and missile programme. It has already affected relations between China and South Korea. In recent days, South Korea has accused China of economic retaliation linked to THAAD in areas including tourism and air travel. Several of South Korean Lotte's stores in China have suddenly

² Ibid.

been closed down which allowed THAAD to be installed on one of its sites. Officially, China rejects claims of economic retaliation.

With China's open displeasure over the issue and the opposition within the country, South Korea faces a diplomatic challenge in balancing out the US pressure to deploy the missile defence system. The matter has already been discussed between South Korea's new President Moon Jae-in in a telephone conversation with Chinese President Xi Jinping. The former said that North Korea must cease making provocations before tensions over the deployment of the anti-missile system in the South can be resolved. Meanwhile, China's president has set out his opposition to the deployment of a US missile system, in his first discussion with the new South Korean leader.³ Now that South Korea's pro-THAAD president has been impeached over corruption charges, the new president is likely to soften his stance over the missile defence system issue, as well as likely to have a more conciliatory stance over relations with North Korea. President Moon Jae-in came to power with a promise to review the deployment of THAAD.

In sum, China's opposition to the THAAD system is not unfounded. As an emerging great power in Asia, it would not welcome any missile defence systems on its doorstep that are likely to affect its security, even in a small manner. The fact of the matter is that the US, as the most powerful state in the world, would never tolerate any missile defence systems in its neighbourhood. Therefore, China as a rising power cannot be expected to tolerate one in its neighbourhood. South Korea needs to exercise a balancing act whereby it can safeguard its security while not antagonising China at the same time.

³ "Newly elected President Moon talks with Xi Jinping," Asia News, May 11, 2017, <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Newly-elected-President-Moon-talks-with-Xi-Jinping-40708.html>