Is the Deployment of THAAD in South Korea a Right Choice?

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There have been recent controversies over the deployment of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system on the South Korean territory. As U.S. Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter said, “THAAD was not on the agenda today.... This is the program that is in production in the U.S.,” after a meeting with South Korean Defense Minister Han Min-koo, his South Korean counterpart, so some predicted the related disputes would blow over. Against these expectations, however, Admiral Samuel Locklear, Commander of U.S. Pacific Command, clarified that a possible deployment of a THAAD battery on the Korean Peninsula was under discussion at a hearing of the Senate Armed Services Committee on April 16 (time of location). When General Curtis Scaparrotti, Commander of the U.S. Forces in Korea, who also attended the hearing, was asked whether the U.S. and South Korea would enforce the placement despite opposition from China, he answered that a process for making a decision on the matter is underway (Yonhap News Agency, 17 April 2015).

Meanwhile, Kim Moo-sung, chairman of the ruling Saenuri Party, and floor leader of the party Yoo Seong-min have supported the introduction of the missile program (Korea Joongang Daily, 10 March 2015; KBS World Radio, 25 March 2015). Some politicians and retired generals in South Korea even argue that the South Korea military should not only just agree that the
U.S. Forces Korea deploy THAAD on the peninsula but should also consider purchasing it to operate for themselves (J. D. Kim 2015).

If the THAAD program provided an effective protection against North Korea’s missile attacks, including nuclear threats, its deployment by the U.S. Forces in Korea should be welcomed, and the South Korea military’s consideration of purchasing one for operation would be necessary. However, a noticeable number of experts are against the deployment for reasons of its ineffectiveness and the huge amount of purchase and operation costs. Furthermore, diplomatic reasons against the deployment have also been raised, as China strongly opposes it, while Russia sympathizes with China on the issue. Therefore, this article will weigh THAAD’s defense effectiveness and the THAAD system’s influence on the political conditions of Northeast Asia. I will argue that, even though North Korea’s missile technology is a real threat and the THAAD’s ability to intercept North Korean missiles is excellent, rushing to deployment of the missile defense system would do little to defend national security.

Currently, the biggest issue about THAAD is its effectiveness in protecting South Korea from a North Korean missile attack. To answer this question, it is necessary to evaluate North Korea’s missile capability, particularly, the ability to arm a missile with a nuclear weapon. If North Korea’s missile attack capability is proven insufficient, there is no reason even to discuss deploying THAAD in Korea. Some experts in China and South Korea view the U.S. as exaggerating North Korea’s nuclear capability and missile power and attempting to make the South install THAAD on the pretext of an overestimated North Korean threat. They also argue the North’s medium-range ballistic missile, the “Musudan,” is far from being a practical arrangement, and far less does North Korea have the ability to complete an intercontinental ballistic missile, including KN-08 (Kyodo News, 9 April 2015; Zheng 2015). In addition, some think that North Korea does not have the miniaturization technology to mount a nuclear weapon on a missile.

In fact, the Musudan, whose range is said to be more than 3,000 kilometers, is an unidentified weapon that has never been test-fired. Also, there is little chance that North Korea has the technology to launch an intercontinental ballistic missile that would successfully re-enter the atmosphere and