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## “ROCKETS’ RED GLARE”

### Why Does China Oppose THAAD in South Korea, and What Does It Mean for U.S. Policy?

*Robert C. Watts IV*

On July 7, 2016, the United States announced plans to deploy a terminal high-altitude area defense (THAAD) battery in South Korea to defend U.S. and allied forces better against North Korean ballistic missiles. China’s response to this announcement was strikingly strident. The following day a Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson expressed China’s “strong dissatisfaction with and firm opposition to the decision” and said that the deployment of THAAD will “gravely sabotage the strategic security interests of regional countries including China.”<sup>1</sup> Several articles in the *China Daily* over the next few weeks described THAAD as a “clear, present, substantive threat to China’s security interests” and compared THAAD’s deployment to a stark example of strategic brinkmanship, stating that “the negative influence of the deployment of THAAD in the [Republic of Korea]

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is similar to that of the Cuban Missile Crisis.”<sup>2</sup> China’s opposition to THAAD has continued since the first components of the system arrived in South Korea and became operational in the spring of 2017.<sup>3</sup>

Unlike the nuclear-armed ballistic missiles that the Soviet Union placed in Cuba in 1962, THAAD is a defensive weapon with limited capability and capacity, so it raises the question of why China so vocally opposes this regional ballistic-missile defense (BMD) system. Chinese media sources suggest three reasons for opposing THAAD in the Republic of Korea (ROK). First, they claim

that THAAD exceeds South Korea's security needs and will spark an arms race on the Korean Peninsula. Second, they claim that THAAD's radar will threaten China's nuclear-deterrent forces, upsetting the strategic balance. Third, they fear that fielding an advanced BMD system in Korea will reinforce and reshape U.S. alliances in Northeast Asia, both by tightening the alliance with South Korea and by fostering a trilateral U.S.-ROK-Japan security relationship. In a July 9, 2016, editorial, the *China Daily* outlined Beijing's argument against THAAD. "[I]t will not only escalate tensions on the Korean Peninsula, but also break the strategic balance and widen the trust deficit among the regional powers. . . . Washington is trying to drive a wedge between Beijing and Seoul, and reinforce the US-Japan-ROK military alliance."<sup>4</sup>

How should the United States evaluate these three concerns, and what are the implications for U.S. policy? This article will describe the decision to deploy THAAD, placing it within the context of U.S. and Chinese policy toward the Korean Peninsula. Next, each of China's three concerns about THAAD will be reviewed to analyze the theoretical underpinnings and assess the relative significance of each. The analysis will find that THAAD is not likely to spark an arms race on the Korean Peninsula, which suggests that China's fear of a security dilemma there is insincere. China's second concern—about strategic stability and the effectiveness of its nuclear deterrent—appears to be more sincere, but it overestimates THAAD's limited contribution to the U.S. homeland-defense BMD system. Although the third concern has not been discussed in the Chinese media as thoroughly, it is likely that THAAD's potential to strengthen America's bilateral alliance with South Korea and to advance trilateral relations among the United States, South Korea, and Japan worries China most. In response, the United States should ignore warnings of a Korean security dilemma, address strategic stability questions, and—most importantly—harness concerns about strengthening alliance relationships so as to spur China's cooperation in denuclearizing North Korea.

## THE KOREAN SECURITY ENVIRONMENT, BMD, AND THE DECISION TO DEPLOY THAAD

The United States and China are the two most significant outside powers with an interest in the Korean Peninsula. Both countries have a shared interest in a nuclear-free North Korea, but from that starting point their policy goals diverge. Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Daniel R. Russel testified to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in 2014 that America desires "peaceful denuclearization" on the Korean Peninsula, and intends to "provide deterrence and defense against the threat posed by the Democratic People's Republic of Korea's (DPRK's) continued pursuit of nuclear weapons and ballistic missile technology."<sup>5</sup> China, on the other hand, seeks denuclearization, but also

wants to maintain political stability in North Korea. When these two objectives conflict, China prefers policies that preserve the status quo over those that apply pressure to end North Korea's nuclear program.<sup>6</sup> Recognizing China's potential to influence decision making in North Korea, President Trump has encouraged Chinese president Xi Jinping, privately and publicly, to use China's influence over North Korea to curtail the latter's nuclear weapons program.<sup>7</sup>

As Assistant Secretary Russel pointed out in his testimony, ballistic missiles are closely related to the threat that North Korea's nuclear ambitions pose. North Korea has a large arsenal of conventional ballistic missiles and desires to arm some of them with nuclear warheads. These weapons may appeal to North Korea because they are relatively inexpensive, can strike at long ranges, and are difficult to defend against. In response to the ballistic-missile threat on the Korean Peninsula and elsewhere around the world, the United States has developed regional BMD systems, including THAAD, to protect deployed U.S. forces and foreign partners, as well as homeland-defense BMD systems to defend the continental United States from attack by a small number of intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs).<sup>8</sup>

THAAD's deployment to South Korea came after several years of negotiations between Washington and Seoul, during which China consistently opposed this weapon system. Spurred by advances in North Korean ballistic-missile technology, the commander of U.S. forces in Korea first proposed the idea in June 2014, and by October 2014 negotiations were in progress.<sup>9</sup> During these discussions, South Korea hedged its position about THAAD and asserted its independent decision-making process. In March 2015, the spokesperson for the South Korean president said that the United States "had not requested to deploy THAAD, the two countries were not consulting about THAAD, and . . . there was no deployment decision."<sup>10</sup> This position was referred to as the "three noes."

That same month, however, the South Korean ministry of defense spokesperson stated that "it is possible that neighboring states could have their own positions on the possible deployment of the THAAD system by the U.S. Forces Korea but they should not attempt to exercise influence on our defense policy."<sup>11</sup> China is a neighboring state that had attempted to influence Korea's decision making, and likely was the target of this remark. In July 2014, Chinese president Xi Jinping asked South Korean president Park Geun-hye to reject deploying THAAD, reportedly saying, "South Korea, as a sovereign country, should exercise its right to express its opposition and the THAAD issue won't be a problem between South Korea and China."<sup>12</sup> China reiterated its opposition to THAAD at several opportunities, including during visits to South Korea by senior defense and foreign ministry officials in 2015.<sup>13</sup>

In February 2016, South Korea abandoned its ambiguity about deploying THAAD and resumed discussions with the United States. This policy change was triggered by North Korea's launch of a satellite into orbit. This rocket launch also may have tested ICBM-related technologies.<sup>14</sup> China continued to voice its opposition to THAAD. For example, Wang Yi, China's foreign minister, said in a February 25, 2016, speech at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, DC, that "China's legitimate national security interests may be jeopardized or threatened [by THAAD]. . . . We believe China's legitimate security concerns must be taken into account, and a convincing explanation must be provided to China."<sup>15</sup>

On July 7, 2016, the U.S. Department of Defense announced that it had decided to deploy THAAD to southeastern South Korea, "as a defensive measure to ensure the security of the ROK and its people, and to protect alliance military forces from North Korea's weapons of mass destruction and ballistic missile threats."<sup>16</sup> China immediately denounced this decision. The following day China's foreign ministry spokesperson said, "[I]n disregard of the clear oppositions from relevant countries including China, the US and ROK announced their decision to deploy the THAAD system in the ROK. China has expressed strong dissatisfaction with and firm opposition to the decision. . . . China strongly urges the US and the ROK to halt the process of deploying the system."<sup>17</sup>

President Xi personally expressed China's opposition during meetings with U.S. president Obama and South Korean president Park during the September 2016 Group of Twenty summit in Hangzhou, China.<sup>18</sup> China complemented its vocal opposition with actions that were tied publicly to China's position on THAAD and appeared intended to coerce South Korea or the United States into changing their deployment plans. For example, China opposed UN statements critical of North Korean missile tests if they did not include language critical of THAAD as well.<sup>19</sup> China also held an unusually large naval exercise—involving over one hundred vessels—in waters adjacent to the Korean Peninsula in September 2016.<sup>20</sup> And the following month, China and Russia announced plans for combined missile-defense exercises.<sup>21</sup> Of most consequence, however, has been China's use of economic statecraft to reduce trade between China and South Korea, such as reducing Chinese tourism to South Korea and cutting off many South Korean entertainers from the Chinese market.<sup>22</sup>

The United States deployed THAAD to South Korea in the spring of 2017, amid domestic political upheaval there.<sup>23</sup> The United States had planned to deploy THAAD in late 2017, but accelerated this in part because of increased perceptions of North Korea's threat, but also perhaps because of events in South Korea. President Park, who supported deploying THAAD, was unseated in March 2017 amid a corruption scandal. The front-runner to replace her, Moon

Jae-in, campaigned against THAAD's deployment. Some assert that the early deployment of THAAD was meant to present Park's successor with a *fait accompli*, thus making it more difficult to reverse the deployment.<sup>24</sup>

The deployment began on March 6, 2017, when a U.S. Air Force cargo plane delivered several missile launchers and other components to South Korea.<sup>25</sup> China's foreign ministry quickly condemned the deployment. The next day its spokesperson said, "[W]e are resolutely against the deployment of THAAD. . . . We once again strongly urge the relevant parties to stop the deployment process, instead of traveling further down the wrong path."<sup>26</sup> Within two months, U.S. and South Korean forces declared the system operational.<sup>27</sup>

THAAD remained controversial even after its deployment. Days before the South Korean presidential election, President Trump said that the cost-sharing arrangement on THAAD should be renegotiated so that Seoul would pay up to one billion dollars more for the system.<sup>28</sup> The original agreement called for the United States to pay the costs of procuring and deploying THAAD, while South Korea would provide land on which to base the system. After President Trump's remarks, his national security advisor, Lieutenant General H. R. McMaster, is reported to have assured his South Korean counterpart that Washington intended to honor the cost-sharing agreement, but later issued a caveat that cost sharing might be subject to future "renegotiation."<sup>29</sup>

Moon Jae-in was elected in March 2017, and that June he halted THAAD's deployment to provide time for an environmental assessment of the deployment site. To expedite the deployment, the Park administration had divided the site into two smaller sites, which would have enabled an abbreviated assessment and facilitated a more rapid deployment. Moon's decision halted the deployment of the remaining four missile launchers, but did not affect the status of the two launchers and the radar that had been deployed already and declared operational.<sup>30</sup> The *New York Times* described the partial delay as "an apparent concession to China."<sup>31</sup>

When asked whether China viewed Moon's decision as "a positive signal, as an affirmation of China's opposition to THAAD," China's foreign ministry spokesperson, rather than agreeing or disagreeing, reiterated, "China's position is clear-cut. We are firm in opposing the deployment of THAAD by the U.S. in the ROK."<sup>32</sup> A commentator in the *China Daily* pointed out that "it is difficult to evaluate the delay in the installation of THAAD after the ROK President Moon Jae-in ordered an environmental evaluation, because he reiterated that the THAAD decision made by his predecessor Park Geun-hye will be carried through."<sup>33</sup> It appeared to Chinese observers that Moon's environmental review likely would slow but not reverse the deployment. This assessment soon appeared to be correct. Several weeks after Moon announced the environmental assessment, South

Korea's foreign minister affirmed Seoul's commitment to deploying THAAD and pointed out that the environmental study was intended to improve domestic political support for the deployment.<sup>34</sup>

### THREE EXPLANATIONS FOR CHINA'S OPPOSITION TO THAAD

China's opposition to THAAD is clear, but it is less apparent exactly why China opposes this system so strongly. Robert Jervis, a scholar at Columbia University, has written that "the roots of many important disputes about policies lie in differing perceptions."<sup>35</sup> To understand China's opposition to THAAD, it is essential to understand China's perception of THAAD and how it believes that THAAD changes the security environment on and around the Korean Peninsula. The following section will explain and evaluate China's three arguments against THAAD: first, that THAAD will spark an arms race on the Korean Peninsula; second, that THAAD threatens China's nuclear deterrent; and third, that THAAD could strengthen and change U.S. alliances in Northeast Asia.

#### *THAAD Creates a Security Dilemma*

China's first argument against THAAD asserts that this weapon system is ill suited for the threats South Korea faces, but at the same time will be a destabilizing influence on the Korean Peninsula because it will encourage an arms race. China's position resembles theoretical arguments Robert Jervis has made about the spiral model of the security dilemma: that "policies aimed at security will threaten others."<sup>36</sup> Jervis outlines how, in an anarchic state of nature, a country achieves security only through its strength, and fears aggression from other states, including possible but unlikely threats. In this environment, strengthening one's own security will make other countries feel threatened, causing them to strengthen themselves in turn. Even weapons intended to be defensive could at the same time threaten the security of other states. Jervis writes that "when states seek the ability to defend themselves, they get too much and too little—too much because they gain the ability to carry out any aggression; too little because others, being menaced, will increase their own arms and so reduce the first state's security."<sup>37</sup> However, the Chinese position does not hold up to close scrutiny, partly because of its internal contradictions, but also because THAAD is a defensive system.

Chinese media reports argue that several aspects of THAAD make it unsuited for use on the Korean Peninsula. These articles contend that because THAAD is intended for use against "long-range" missiles it is unable to defend Seoul and other parts of South Korea from short-range North Korean threats, such as artillery. A researcher at the People's Liberation Army (PLA) Academy of Military Science said that THAAD "mainly targets long-range missiles and has nothing to do with intercepting short-range ones launched by the DPRK."<sup>38</sup> A *China Daily* article describes THAAD as defending against missiles "at a high altitude

of 40–150 km [kilometers],” but then counters that this high-altitude capability is meaningless because “hundreds of DPRK missiles targeting South Korea will fly at a much lower altitude of less than 20 km.”<sup>39</sup> Yet another article points out that THAAD would be useless against the artillery and short-range rockets that threaten Seoul. Because of these limitations, the Chinese author concludes that THAAD “is not a good option.”<sup>40</sup>

Despite arguing that THAAD does not add much to the defense of South Korea, one Chinese scholar assessed that this weapon will “stoke an arms race on the Korean Peninsula.”<sup>41</sup> He Yafei, a former vice-minister of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, writes that THAAD will “undermine the regional strategic balance in East Asia. . . . When the strategic balance of a region is broken, an arms race follows and regional disputes and conflicts intensify.”<sup>42</sup> More explicitly outlining the dynamics of an anticipated Korean Peninsula security dilemma, a researcher at the PLA’s National Defense University writes that THAAD “will inevitably make the much weaker DPRK feel a more immediate security threat and then motivate it to develop more conventional and even nuclear weapons to ensure its security. . . . The vicious circle resulting from escalated military moves and countermeasures will only result in escalated military tensions.”<sup>43</sup>

The language Chinese observers use to suggest that THAAD could start an arms race echoes Robert Jervis’s spiral model of the security dilemma, but the Chinese position has several flaws. Logically, how could a weapon that does not add much capability to the defense of South Korea, as Chinese writers argue, change the security balance meaningfully and create a security dilemma? Furthermore, North Korea already has the world’s fourth-largest army and spends over one-third of its gross domestic product on its military, so whether THAAD is deployed is irrelevant; North Korea likely is devoting as many resources as it can to building and sustaining its military already.<sup>44</sup> Yet while these two contradictory arguments do not hold up in concert, they still are worth examining individually.

The first argument—that THAAD exceeds the defensive needs of South Korea—is flawed in several ways. From the U.S. and South Korean perspectives, THAAD adds to existing defenses, particularly as North Korea improves its missile technology. According to the director of the U.S. Missile Defense Agency (MDA), THAAD can “deepen, extend, and complement” other BMD systems in general, while on the Korean Peninsula it “contributes to a layered missile defense system and enhances the U.S.-ROK Alliance’s defense against North Korean missile threats.”<sup>45</sup> While THAAD may not meet all of South Korea’s complex and challenging defensive needs, it complements other defenses and adds improved capabilities.



Before THAAD's deployment, U.S. and ROK forces had several BMD capabilities. The Patriot missile system provides land-based endo-atmospheric point defense against ballistic missiles in the terminal phase of flight, meaning it engages a threat inside the earth's atmosphere as it descends toward a target. The Patriot's operational range is estimated to be twenty to thirty-five kilometers (km) up to an altitude of 15–32 km.<sup>46</sup> The U.S. Navy also can provide endo-atmospheric terminal defenses with its SM-6 missiles, plus exo-atmospheric defenses against longer-range missiles in the midcourse phase of flight using SM-3 missiles.<sup>47</sup>

Like the Patriot and SM-6, THAAD is a terminal defense system, but it has increased speed, altitude, and area-coverage capabilities. Its interceptor's speed of Mach 8 far exceeds the Patriot's Mach 3.<sup>48</sup> THAAD is able to engage targets both within and just beyond the atmosphere, suggesting an altitude capability exceeding a hundred kilometers, the highest extent of the earth's atmosphere.<sup>49</sup> The U.S. MDA believes that this high-altitude capability is important because a "high-altitude intercept mitigates effects of enemy weapons of mass destruction before they reach the ground."<sup>50</sup> This capability may be particularly important against North Korean missiles that could be armed with nuclear warheads. THAAD's estimated operational range is two hundred kilometers, enabling it to defend a substantially larger area than the Patriot.<sup>51</sup> When used in coordination with other BMD systems, as in South Korea, THAAD likely provides additional engagement opportunities. Deploying THAAD should bolster the resiliency and capacity of BMDs on the Korean Peninsula and increase the probability of intercepting North Korean ballistic missiles successfully.

THAAD's improved capabilities, in comparison with other U.S. and ROK BMD systems, also may be relevant owing to recent improvements in North Korean ballistic-missile technology. For example, Pyongyang has added a "lofted" trajectory to its Rodong medium-range ballistic missile. By lofting the missile—launching it at a more elevated angle—the rocket's reach is shorter but it gains a higher altitude and higher speed than a missile flying the same range along the most efficient trajectory. South Korea's ministry of defense has argued that the speed and altitude of a lofted Rodong reduce its vulnerability to Patriot missiles, but it remains within THAAD's engagement capabilities.<sup>52</sup> The Rodong is of particular concern to the South Korean government because officials believe North Korea is able to arm it with a miniaturized nuclear weapon.<sup>53</sup> It is difficult to assess the technical merits of the ministry of defense's analysis, but it is noteworthy that South Korean officials argue that THAAD addresses a specific defensive capability gap brought on by advancements in North Korean missile technology.

Chinese analysts correctly point out that THAAD does not add much capability to the defense of Seoul against short-range artillery and unguided rockets. But there is more to defending South Korea than simply defending Seoul; North

Korea likely would not limit wartime attacks to the capital city. While the city may be not only the political but the economic heart of South Korea, targets distant from Seoul also would be important to U.S. and South Korean defensive efforts. One example is Pusan, a busy containerport in southeastern Korea.<sup>54</sup> Although it is over three hundred kilometers from the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) that separates the two Koreas, Pusan is within the range of some North Korean ballistic missiles. The North Korean announcement of a July 2016 test launch implied that using ballistic missiles to attack a port, such as Pusan, is an aspect of Pyongyang's war plans. "The drill was conducted . . . under the simulated conditions of making pre-emptive strikes at ports and airfields in . . . South Korea."<sup>55</sup> Arguing that THAAD does not defend Seoul ignores other ways in which the system might contribute to South Korea's defense.

The second part of China's argument is that THAAD creates an arms race on the Korean Peninsula. To evaluate this concern, it is important to determine whether THAAD is a defensive system. Jervis proposes that if a defensive weapon can be distinguished from an offensive weapon, a state can increase its defensive armament without causing another state to feel threatened, or in other words, without sparking an arms race. However, it could be difficult to make this distinction, because "a weapon is either offensive or defensive according to which end of it you're looking at."<sup>56</sup> Furthermore, weapons can be both defensive and offensive in character. Jervis suggests several criteria to assess whether a weapon is defensive or offensive. A defensive weapon should focus on keeping an adversary from entering one's territory, should not extend one's reach into an opponent's territory, and should be immobile. Mobile forces, even if defensive, are problematic because they can advance with and protect offensive forces. On the other hand, according to Jervis's argument, weapons that can destroy enemy defenses or are more effective when used in a surprise attack are inherently offensive.<sup>57</sup>

On the basis of these criteria and THAAD's characteristics, one can conclude that THAAD is not an offensive system, and is instead primarily defensive. First, although the Russian deputy minister of defense argued in June 2017 that THAAD "is not only a ballistic missile defense system, but it has dual function: it can launch attack missiles a long distance," there is no evidence that THAAD has an offensive capability.<sup>58</sup> The missile carries no warhead and has not been tested against land targets.<sup>59</sup> With no offensive capability, it could not be used to mount a surprise attack. In fact, there is little surprise about THAAD's deployment—its location alongside a golf course is well known, and the U.S. Department of Defense publicized its March 2017 arrival in South Korea.<sup>60</sup> Second, THAAD has several capability limitations. It is a mobile system, as its March 2017 delivery by strategic airlift demonstrated; yet once it is in place political considerations may make it unlikely the battery will be repositioned. Its 2017 deployment to South

Korea was halted to conduct an environmental-impact assessment of its new base, which may take up to a year to complete.<sup>61</sup> Any future relocation probably would be similarly constrained, except perhaps in extremis. Other capability limitations include that it has no anti-aircraft capability and is located about three hundred kilometers south of the DMZ. So THAAD can target only ballistic missiles, and its interceptor's range does not extend into North Korea. By Jervis's definition, THAAD is not an offensive system, and actually exhibits many characteristics that would define it as a defensive weapon.

Chinese observers argue that THAAD is ill suited for use in South Korea and creates a security dilemma on the peninsula, but THAAD appears to be a useful, defensive weapon that should not cause an arms race when viewed through the theoretical lens of the different impacts of offensive and defensive weapons. THAAD arguably is a defensive weapon that adds improved capabilities and an additional layer of defense for U.S. and South Korean forces. Contrary to the criticism some Chinese analysts have voiced, these aspects of THAAD should reduce its risk of contributing to a security dilemma on the Korean Peninsula.

### *THAAD Upsets Strategic Stability*

As Jervis writes, “[S]tates underestimate the degree to which they menace others.”<sup>62</sup> Perhaps the United States underestimates the menace THAAD poses to China. China's second argument against THAAD suggests that it is part of an American global missile-defense system that threatens China's limited nuclear deterrent and leaves China vulnerable to coercion by the United States.<sup>63</sup>

This argument focuses on THAAD's AN/TPY-2 radar, which has two operational modes. To provide fire-control data to a THAAD battery, it operates in a shorter-range “terminal” mode; to provide early-warning and cueing data to other regional or strategic BMD systems, it can operate in a longer-range “forward-based” mode.<sup>64</sup> Chinese observers contend that THAAD's radar improves the U.S. homeland-defense BMD system by collecting data on Chinese missile tests in peacetime and providing targeting information on Chinese ICBM launches in wartime.<sup>65</sup> Contrary to these fears, U.S. BMD policy and weapons are not directed against China. Furthermore, the AN/TPY-2 radar is not likely to change appreciably the information available to the United States about China's strategic capabilities.

Several articles in the Chinese media best encapsulate this argument against THAAD and demonstrate the mistrust that exists in China about THAAD's purpose in South Korea. Building on the argument that THAAD is not needed in South Korea, an August 2016 *China Daily* article asserts that there is a “hidden agenda behind THAAD, an installation that barely covers Seoul but extends its reach into China,” and concludes that “THAAD can be used to collect radar data of warheads and decoys of Chinese and Russian strategic missiles by monitoring

their tests, thus enabling the United States to neutralize their nuclear deterrence and put the national security of China and Russia at risk.”<sup>66</sup> Similarly, the *PLA Daily* wrote in July 2016 that THAAD “far exceeds the defense needs of the United States and South Korea in the Korean Peninsula. . . . The United States apparently has an ulterior object in mind. . . . The real intention is to target China and Russia and further advance the construction of the US global missile defense system.”<sup>67</sup>

This fear and mistrust about THAAD are consistent with China’s broader concerns about how America’s BMD systems could affect China’s limited nuclear deterrent negatively. China’s strategic rocket force has only seventy-five to one hundred nuclear-armed ICBMs.<sup>68</sup> By comparison, the U.S. nuclear force has over four hundred deployed ICBMs, up to 230 submarine-launched ballistic missiles deployed on submarines, and eighty nuclear-capable strategic bombers.<sup>69</sup> Employment of China’s relatively small nuclear arsenal—sometimes referred to in Chinese writings as a “lean and effective” force—is believed to be governed by a “no first use” (NFU) policy.<sup>70</sup> Pan Zhenqiang, a professor at the PLA’s National Defense University, explained the principles behind this policy when he wrote, “NFU highlights China’s philosophical belief that nuclear weapons can only be used to serve one purpose, that of retaliation against nuclear attack.”<sup>71</sup> While there is a vigorous debate among analysts of China’s nuclear program regarding whether Beijing actually would adhere to its NFU policy, China’s nuclear force structure was developed within the constraints of this policy. As a result, China has only a small number of strategic nuclear weapons.<sup>72</sup>

The Chinese strategic community believes that BMD poses “the most serious threat to China’s nuclear deterrent.”<sup>73</sup> While American BMD may be rudimentary at this point, some Chinese analysts fear that its potential to grow and improve over time is unlimited. This expectation fosters a fear that U.S. BMD will threaten China’s nuclear retaliatory capability. Sun Xiangli at the China Academy of Engineering Physics writes that “because China’s nuclear forces have maintained a limited scope for a long time, China is very sensitive to threats from strategic missile defenses. As long as strategic missile defenses develop without limit, China’s limited nuclear deterrent will inevitably be challenged.”<sup>74</sup> When combined with the risk of a U.S. first strike against China’s small nuclear force, effective BMD could secure the United States from nuclear retaliation, in the eyes of some Chinese analysts. Assessing U.S. motives for developing BMD systems, two Chinese defense experts are reported to have said, “[T]he essence of developing missile defense is to search for a shield against nuclear weapons. Once it succeeds, it will trigger a deep and widespread military revolution and even change the nature of politics.”<sup>75</sup> According to this perspective, BMD could undermine strategic stability, meaning that it could weaken America’s perceived risk of suffering an

unacceptable level of damage in a nuclear exchange, thus creating opportunities for the United States to threaten the use of nuclear weapons to coerce China.<sup>76</sup>

How does deploying THAAD to South Korea interact with China's fear that U.S. BMD makes China's nuclear deterrent less credible? Chinese concerns stem from THAAD's associated radar. Some in China argue that the AN/TPY-2 radar is able both to collect data on Chinese missile tests and to provide early-warning or cueing information to strategic BMD systems. According to the *PLA Daily*, "not only can [the radar] glean information from the region and accumulate data on target features in peacetime, but it can also serve as an early identification and tracking tool in wartime."<sup>77</sup> Wu Riqiang, a professor at Renmin University in Beijing and a former missile designer, said, "China is not concerned with THAAD interceptors. China is concerned with THAAD radar."<sup>78</sup> He contends that a forward-deployed radar such as the AN/TPY-2 could provide early warning of an ICBM attack against the United States, thus increasing the homeland-defense system's engagement opportunities. By tracking Chinese ICBMs early in their flight, the United States also might be able to observe the ICBM deploy decoys, thereby enabling defensive systems to distinguish better between decoys and warheads.<sup>79</sup> This argument suggests that the radar associated with this regional BMD system also could make the homeland-defense BMD system more effective by increasing the depth of fire and more efficient by reducing the number of engagements against decoys.

The idea that a BMD capability threatens a nation's nuclear deterrent and degrades strategic stability is new neither to the world nor to China. Thomas C. Schelling, the late eminent scholar, wrote of the Cold War strategic balance that "ballistic missile defenses, if installed on a large scale by the U.S. or the Soviet Union, might preserve or destroy stability based on whether or not they increased or decreased the advantage to either side of striking first."<sup>80</sup> These consequences are particularly meaningful for a small nuclear power such as China. Effective BMD could make nuclear war more likely, because BMD potentially gives the "first striker" an advantage. The first striker may not be able to eliminate all its enemy's nuclear forces, but its BMD would place at risk the smaller number of weapons launched in a retaliatory second strike.<sup>81</sup> As a result, the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, which limited the United States and the Soviet Union to protecting one location with a BMD system each, has been described as the "savior of small nuclear programs" like China's, by ensuring that enemy targets remained vulnerable to retaliation by a smaller nuclear force.<sup>82</sup>

For at least the last decade, China's opposition to American BMD systems has been consistent over different times and locations, so it is not unique to THAAD's deployment in South Korea. Speaking at a conference on disarmament in Geneva in 2009, China's then foreign minister Yang Jiechi said, "[T]he practice

of seeking absolute strategic advantage should be abandoned. Countries should [not] develop missile defense systems that undermine global strategic stability.”<sup>83</sup> More recently, China has opposed the deployment of AN/TPY-2 radars, without THAAD batteries, at two locations in Japan. While the United States and Japan linked these deployments to North Korean nuclear and missile advancements, the Chinese foreign ministry spokesman criticized the decision in 2013, saying that it would “bring about a severe negative impact on global strategic stability.”<sup>84</sup> China consistently has opposed U.S. BMD improvements and deployments in Northeast Asia.

China’s position on BMD resembles that represented in Russian and many Chinese reports about THAAD that include Russia as an affected party, but this view likely represents a convenient alignment rather than overlapping interests. Russia has objected both to NATO’s Aegis Ashore system in Romania and Poland and to THAAD in South Korea. Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov criticized the decision to deploy THAAD, saying that “this situation should not be used as a pretext for massive militarization of Northeast Asia and the deployment in the region of yet another positioning area for the US anti-missile defense shield.”<sup>85</sup> Russia’s strategic nuclear force is much larger than China’s, and therefore less vulnerable to low-capacity BMD systems. Moscow’s opposition may be rooted less in concerns about assuring mutual vulnerability than in political considerations, such as how BMD reinforces U.S. relationships with Moscow’s former allies in eastern Europe.<sup>86</sup>

From a theoretical perspective, China’s concern about American regional and homeland BMD capabilities degrading its nuclear deterrent is understandable, but in the narrower practical context of THAAD in South Korea these concerns are misplaced. U.S. strategic BMD capabilities are not focused on China. It is possible that the AN/TPY-2 radar may improve U.S. understanding of Chinese strategic capabilities, but no matter whether it does, the United States already has an array of sensors that can provide the kind of intelligence and surveillance data about which China is concerned.

According to U.S. defense policy, American BMD capabilities are directed against “rogue states” such as North Korea and Iran that have or may be developing nuclear weapons and the ability to employ them via long-range ballistic missiles. Furthermore, U.S. policy explains that this technology is not intended for use against Russia or China. The 2010 U.S. Department of Defense *Ballistic Missile Defense Review Report* included the following:

Today, only Russia and China have the capability to conduct a large-scale ballistic missile attack on the territory of the United States, but this is very unlikely and not the focus of U.S. BMD. . . .

. . . As the United States has stated in the past, the homeland missile defense capabilities are focused on regional actors such as Iran and North Korea. While the GMD [ground-based midcourse defense, which uses ground-based interceptor, or GBI, missiles] system would be employed to defend the United States against limited missile launches from any source, it does not have the capacity to cope with large scale Russian or Chinese missile attacks, and is not intended to affect the strategic balance with those countries.<sup>87</sup>

America's homeland-defense BMD system reflects this policy. It has forty-four GBIs, which constitute the only BMD weapon that can engage an ICBM.<sup>88</sup> President Trump and members of Congress have advocated fielding twenty additional interceptors.<sup>89</sup> Yet even such a larger future force would constitute a relatively small number of interceptors. Particularly in light of GBIs' low success rate in testing, the homeland-defense BMD system has insufficient capacity to defend the United States against a large raid from either Russia or China.<sup>90</sup>

It may be difficult for the United States to address China's concern about the AN/TPY-2 radar. Chinese analysts mistrust assurances that the radar is intended only to target North Korea. The *China Daily* reported that South Korean president Park promised Chinese president Xi that the radar would operate in its shorter-range terminal mode rather than in forward-based mode. Wang Junsheng, a scholar at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, wrote in response that "this is hogwash, for even if the first THAAD's range were only 200 km, it can be easily upgraded."<sup>91</sup> Reporting indicates that the two modes use the same hardware but different software, suggesting it may take no longer than eight hours to change modes.<sup>92</sup>

Regardless of the uncertainty about how the radar is used and whether it is as capable as the Chinese believe, THAAD on the Korean Peninsula does not change dramatically the methods available to the United States for peacetime intelligence collection or wartime early warning and cueing. For gathering technical information about missile tests around the world, the U.S. Air Force manages an intelligence-collection program that includes advanced radars and optical sensors at ground sites, on planes, and on ships.<sup>93</sup> There are many other sensors available to the United States, including Space Tracking and Surveillance System satellites; other AN/TPY-2 radars in Japan; Aegis radars on BMD-capable ships at sea; and the Sea-Based X-band radar (known as SBX), which is a large, missile-tracking radar mounted on a mobile oil rig-like hull.<sup>94</sup> So, although it may not be a satisfying explanation to a Chinese audience that is wary of American BMD capabilities, introducing one THAAD radar into South Korea does not appear to add much to America's existing BMD sensor coverage in Northeast Asia.

### *THAAD Strengthens Northeast Asian Alliances*

China also has raised concerns about THAAD's potential influence on Northeast Asian alliance relationships, specifically that the missile-defense system could

strengthen ties between the United States and South Korea and improve the trilateral relationship among the United States, Japan, and South Korea. Writing in general terms, Thomas J. Christensen, a professor at Princeton University, has noted that there is a “stimulative effect of North Korean activities on U.S. alliances.”<sup>95</sup> More specifically, Charles L. Glaser at George Washington University has written that China likely is less concerned about THAAD’s impact on its nuclear deterrent than about “the role that cooperation on the deployment of BMD systems plays in deepening U.S. military alliances with South Korea and Japan.”<sup>96</sup> The *China Daily* also has highlighted the relationship between THAAD and U.S. alliances: “[T]he US is trying to tear China and ROK apart and reinforce the US-Japan-ROK military alliance.”<sup>97</sup> So, how does China perceive THAAD’s effect on both these alliance systems?

As China has become more economically important to South Korea, ROK leaders have had to balance delicately their growing economic and political relationship with China with their enduring security alliance with the United States.<sup>98</sup> Chinese analysts directly associate THAAD with the prospects for future Sino-Korean economic and political relations. Wang Junsheng writes that “the deployment of THAAD in the ROK will almost certainly set a ticking time bomb in the two peoples’ minds, as well as bilateral economic ties.”<sup>99</sup> A *China Daily* editorial indicates that “the THAAD move will deal a blow to China-ROK ties, which are enjoying their best ever period since the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1992.”<sup>100</sup> On the other hand, South Korea and the United States have very deep political and security ties, dating back to America’s participation in the 1950–53 Korean War. America remains the guarantor of South Korean security, with 28,500 troops stationed there. In peacetime, the two countries exercise together routinely; in wartime, America would exercise operational control of South Korean forces, and the United States provides extended nuclear deterrence.<sup>101</sup>

In recent years, South Korea has gone to great lengths to avoid choosing publicly between China and the United States, and this has been particularly apparent in the BMD realm. In 2015, South Korea hesitated to endorse THAAD’s deployment. Government representatives then responded to questions about it with the “three noes” and began to develop an indigenous BMD system, called the Korea Air and Missile Defense, as an alternative to U.S. BMD systems.<sup>102</sup> Even after the 2016 deployment decision, South Korea’s defense minister Han Min-ko announced that THAAD “will not be related to sharing information with the U.S. [regional missile defense] system” and reiterated that “[s]ince the Kim Dae-jung administration, our nation has maintained the policy of not participating in the [U.S.] missile defense system.”<sup>103</sup> His comments appeared to signal that, although THAAD will be in South Korea, it will not serve as a precursor to greater Korean integration with U.S. BMD systems.



By hosting THAAD, South Korea chose a U.S. security initiative in the face of China's fierce objections. While South Korea has emphasized that THAAD's deployment does not reflect on its relationship with China, Beijing disagrees. Some in China have accused South Korea not only of tightening the relationship with the United States but simultaneously of rejecting China. An analyst at the PLA National Defense University wrote, "Washington wants to utilize THAAD to bind the ROK more tightly to the U.S. chariot."<sup>104</sup> Wang Junsheng described the deployment of THAAD as a "strategic competition issue between China and [the] U.S., which is a zero-sum game," and assessed that China will treat South Korea as if it "gave up [its] balanced position between China and [the] U.S."<sup>105</sup> Similarly, the *China Daily* wrote that "the only side that profits from the situation is the United States. By successfully distancing China and the ROK from each other, the US has secured its alliance with the ROK and the ground for continued presence of US military bases there."<sup>106</sup>

Despite South Korea's sensitivity to China's perceptions of THAAD's deployment, Moon Jae-in's administration has affirmed South Korea's commitment to THAAD, while simultaneously slowing the deployment to conduct an environmental assessment. In June 2017 remarks in Washington, DC, South Korean foreign minister Kang Kyung-wha described South Korea's position on THAAD and highlighted the importance of the U.S.-ROK alliance.

My government has no intention to basically reverse the commitments made in the spirit of the ROK-U.S. alliance. Going through the environmental-impact assessment is an issue of domestic due process. It does not mean that we will cancel or reverse the decision to deploy THAAD. With democratic and procedural legitimacy obtained, we will strengthen public support for the deployment, which in turn will further strengthen the alliance into the future. The deployment of THAAD was an alliance decision, so will we, as alliance [*sic*], continue to collaborate on the basis of mutual trust.<sup>107</sup>

Although THAAD complicates South Korea's relations with China, Seoul appears to view THAAD as a potentially positive element of the U.S.-ROK alliance. Deploying THAAD in South Korea also may increase the likelihood of further developing a formal or informal trilateral security relationship among the United States, Japan, and South Korea. Two American scholars described this "consequence of Chinese inaction," regarding North Korea's nuclear program as one part of a "nightmare for Chinese defense planners."<sup>108</sup> Throughout the Cold War and into the post-Cold War era, the United States has had strong bilateral alliances with South Korea and with Japan, but the relationship between Japan and South Korea has been the "important but precariously unpredictable leg" of the U.S.-Japan-South Korea triangle, according to Victor Cha, former director of Asian affairs at the U.S. National Security Council.<sup>109</sup> He described South

Korea–Japan relations as a “quasi alliance,” a circumstance in which two countries are not allied with each other but are allied with a common third party, in this case the United States.<sup>110</sup>

Both the potential and the limitations of this quasi alliance were evident in June 2017. Following a North Korean test of a ballistic missile that could reach Alaska, the United States flew two B-1 bombers over South Korea to reassure U.S. allies and deter North Korea. The bombers were escorted by both South Korean and Japanese fighter aircraft. According to a U.S. military official, this “demonstrate[d] solidarity between Japan, ROK and the US to defend against provocative and destabilizing actions in the Pacific theater.” Although this description suggests an effective trilateral defense relationship, press reports indicated that, although the fighter escorts flew in coordination with each other, each was conducting “separate bilateral missions” (i.e., between the United States and South Korea and between the United States and Japan).<sup>111</sup> Thus, even at a moment of heightened tensions, South Korea and Japan appear to have preferred bilateral operations with the United States.

American policy makers advocate improving trilateral ties beyond this quasi alliance. American leaders in both the State and Defense Departments have shared a consensus that improving trilateral relations among the United States, Japan, and South Korea is a policy priority. In 2014, representatives from both departments testified to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that the United States desired and would benefit from closer trilateral relations. Assistant Secretary of State Daniel Russel testified that “strategic cooperation among the United States, Japan, and the ROK is essential to developing the security order in North-east Asia, especially given the threats facing us and our allies from North Korea and other regional uncertainties.”<sup>112</sup> David F. Helvey, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for East Asia, said that “the dynamic nature of the region, and the growing threat from North Korea, make trilateral cooperation among the United States, the Republic of Korea, and Japan more important than ever. Simply put, trilateral security cooperation is an essential element of deterrence against North Korean threats. The Department of Defense encourages a healthy and open United States, Republic of Korea, and Japan relationship.”<sup>113</sup>

Although U.S. policy makers desire improved trilateral relations, there are significant historical obstacles to achieving this goal. The legacies of history—particularly Japan’s decades of conquest on the Korean Peninsula in the early twentieth century and a continuing territorial dispute—complicate efforts to achieve a more durable trilateral relationship. Korea was a Japanese colony from 1910 to 1945, and Japan’s rule was particularly harsh during the Sino-Japanese War and World War II. Japanese soldiers forced tens of thousands of Korean women, euphemistically called “comfort women,” into sexual slavery. Differing

perceptions of whether Japan has apologized sincerely for these and other wartime abuses impede improved South Korea–Japan relations.<sup>114</sup> Similarly, the two countries disagree over who has sovereignty over an island group in the Sea of Japan, known as Dokdo to the South Koreans and Takeshima to the Japanese. South Korean president Lee Myung-bak visited these islands in 2012, eliciting a strong response from Japan, which faces several other territorial disputes over islands, such as those involving the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands with China and Taiwan and the Northern Territories / Southern Kurils with Russia.<sup>115</sup>

Such lingering tensions have made it more difficult to achieve trilateral cooperation, and analysts disagree about the role the United States should play in resolving these tensions. The impact of history on South Korea–Japan relations was evident in 2012 when a proposed intelligence-sharing pact between the two countries collapsed shortly before the signing ceremony. The agreement failed because of South Korean domestic opposition rooted in lingering historical animosity.<sup>116</sup> Some analysts believe that the United States should play a more active role in encouraging Japan and South Korea to resolve these historical and territorial disputes.<sup>117</sup> Others argue that “Washington cannot broker a deal on the complex issue of historical memory.”<sup>118</sup> THAAD is certainly not a mechanism to settle these differences, but BMD cooperation could foster a more productive working relationship between Tokyo and Seoul.

Whether in the context of bilateral U.S.-ROK relations or trilateral U.S.-Japan-ROK relations, China appears to be concerned about several aspects of BMD that could overcome history and strengthen alliance relationships. The United States encourages many of its allies to participate in BMD efforts. The U.S. Department of Defense’s 2014 *Quadrennial Defense Review* highlights the importance of multinational BMD: “Allied and partner acquisition of interoperable ballistic missile defense capabilities and participation in regional deterrence and defense architectures will counter the coercive and operational value of adversary ballistic missile systems.”<sup>119</sup> Furthermore, technical aspects of BMD encourage deliberate planning, information sharing, and time-sensitive decision making, all of which lend themselves to closer integration of multinational capabilities. The threat missiles move so quickly over such a long distance that the windows of opportunity to detect and engage them are small in area and short in time. Data often are shared among several sensors to detect and track a target; if these sensors belong to different countries, reliable data-sharing processes should be put in place. Additionally, because the threat may be within a BMD system’s engagement envelope only briefly, decisions must be made quickly, perhaps according to preplanned, automated doctrines, which could mean that engagement authority is delegated to firing units. Without coordinated planning, information sharing,

and decision making, there is a greater risk of missed engagement opportunities or redundant employment of limited interceptors.

While integrating with U.S. BMD systems, a country may discover that, given these unique characteristics, existing defense policies do not work well, which can lead to significant changes in doctrine and command and control (C2). Sugio Takahashi, a scholar at Japan's National Institute for Defense Studies, has documented how BMD cooperation with the United States transformed Japan's defense posture and relationship with its U.S. ally. As BMD cooperation increased, Japan amended its self-defense force law to allow its prime minister to predelegate engagement authority to the missile-defense task force. Additionally, the Japan Air Self-Defense Force relocated its Air Defense Force headquarters to the U.S. base in Yokota and built a Bilateral Joint Operations Coordination Center there, in part to facilitate the "seamless operational cooperation between the two countries' BMD systems."<sup>120</sup> It is not unreasonable for Chinese analysts to be concerned that similar operational demands could lead South Korea to change its own military doctrine and C2 if it integrates more closely with U.S. BMD systems.

Although Seoul has assured Beijing that THAAD deployment does not mean South Korea is joining an American BMD network, Chinese observers remain concerned it could lead to changes in South Korea's defense posture and alliance relationships, like those they have observed with regard to Japan. Regarding THAAD, the *PLA Daily* wrote that "South Korea cannot help but open up its intelligence and information to the United States and Japan in the areas of air defense, early warning, and airspace control if it imports THAAD."<sup>121</sup> China already may be seeing evidence to support this argument. Overcoming both historical animosities and South Korean public opinion, South Korea and Japan signed a revised information-sharing agreement, called the General Security of Military Information Agreement, in November 2016. Xinhua wrote that this agreement would "serve the U.S. pivot-to-Asia strategy by integrating military intelligence programs among the three countries," hinting at China's fear of a strengthened trilateral relationship.<sup>122</sup>

Summarizing America's interest in enhanced trilateral cooperation, the commander of U.S. Pacific Command, Admiral Harry B. Harris Jr., said, "If you look at Northeast Asia, we have treaties to defend Japan and treaties to defend South Korea. I think there's value in a Northeast Asia trilateral [agreement], where we bring Japan, the United States, and South Korea together, [which] I'm working hard on." Actions in the western Pacific suggest that these efforts to improve trilateral relations have the potential to succeed, specifically regarding BMD cooperation. For example, in June 2016 the U.S., Japanese, and South Korean

navies held a BMD-tracking exercise, with a total of five ships from the three countries.<sup>123</sup> As China appears to fear, BMD could be a mechanism for improved trilateral cooperation. It would be reasonable for China to assume that THAAD might advance this trend.

### POLICY IMPLICATIONS FOR THE UNITED STATES

Having considered several alternative explanations for China's opposition to THAAD, we can ask: What is the relative importance of each explanation? And what are the ramifications for U.S. policy? First, China's fears of a security dilemma on the Korean Peninsula are unfounded. Second, the United States should appreciate China's concern about THAAD's potential impact on its nuclear deterrent and take steps to reassure China about the limited objectives of America's homeland-defense BMD program. Third, recognizing that China is particularly concerned about America's Northeast Asian alliances, the United States should leverage THAAD and BMD cooperation with South Korea and Japan to strengthen bilateral ties with South Korea and build up trilateral U.S.–Japan–South Korea relations. On the basis of this analysis, Beijing's opposition to THAAD should not weigh on decision making in Washington about its employment in South Korea but instead should remind policy makers of the value and potential of U.S. alliances in Northeast Asia.

First, China's argument that THAAD exceeds the needs of defending the Korean Peninsula and could spark an arms race there is not supported well by facts and should not affect U.S. policy. As the North Korean missile threat becomes more advanced and as the pace of the country's testing accelerates, it is reasonable for the United States and South Korea to bolster their defenses of critical forces, infrastructure, and populations. The United States may want to consider informing Chinese interlocutors about the tactical circumstances that require THAAD, but otherwise should not change its deployment posture because of this criticism.

Second, Washington should acknowledge but refute Beijing's concern about BMD and THAAD's impact on the viability of its strategic nuclear deterrent. Even if the United States desired to use BMD to defend against a Chinese strategic nuclear attack, adding an AN/TPY-2 radar to the Korean Peninsula likely does not change appreciably the threat information available to the U.S. homeland-defense BMD system. Chinese authors have criticized the United States for not making efforts to cooperate with China on BMD concerns; they suggest the United States should "restrain offensive capabilities and defensive capabilities, increase transparency, and enhance bilateral dialogues" to convince China of the limited aims of American BMD capabilities.<sup>124</sup> This proposal—that the United States should adopt unilateral arms limits—likely would not be acceptable to the United States;

however, more discussions of BMD capabilities and limitations may be useful as a confidence-building measure.

There are several approaches the United States could take to reassure China about THAAD's limited impact on its nuclear deterrent. Some U.S. scholars have proposed reassuring China about THAAD and GBI's focus on North Korea through steps such as a joint technical analysis of U.S. BMD programs, and inviting Chinese observers to monitor tests of the homeland-defense BMD system.<sup>125</sup> Their recommendation could be extended to include observing a THAAD test. Steps to increase transparency would need to strike a fine balance of revealing enough to convince China that the AN/TPY-2 radar in South Korea does not threaten Beijing's ICBMs while not revealing capabilities and limitations that China's own conventional ballistic missiles then could exploit. In any case, China may not be interested in attempts at transparency; in 2016, the United States offered to brief Chinese officials about the AN/TPY-2 radar, but China rebuffed these offers.<sup>126</sup> Alternatively, the United States could emphasize to China that, by safeguarding South Korea and Japan from a North Korean nuclear attack, BMD acts as a brake on their nuclear programs.<sup>127</sup> The development of nuclear weapons by South Korea and Japan might be a worse outcome for China's security than a limited U.S. BMD program.

Rather than addressing China's concern about BMD's impact on China's nuclear deterrent, others have advocated using BMD and THAAD to leverage this concern and encourage China to influence North Korea more effectively. According to this perspective, if China supports meaningful sanctions against North Korea, the United States will not deploy any more strategic GBIs. If South Korea and the United States agreed that North Korea's nuclear program no longer posed a threat, the United States would withdraw THAAD from South Korea, and perhaps begin to reduce the number of GBIs.<sup>128</sup> However, although there is coercive logic to balancing the perceived threat of THAAD and GBI with the assurance of future BMD disarmament pending North Korean compliance, appearing to bend to Chinese pressure on BMD might complicate U.S. efforts to reassure regional allies about American security commitments.<sup>129</sup> Instead of using THAAD as a bargaining chip with China, the United States should use it as a catalyst for improvements in the bilateral U.S.–South Korea alliance and trilateral U.S.–Japan–South Korea relations.

Third, the United States should recognize the importance China places on THAAD's potential influence on American alliances in Northeast Asia, and leverage this concern to demonstrate the tangible impact of Beijing's lack of success in persuading Pyongyang to restrain its nuclear and ballistic-missile programs. As China seems to fear, THAAD specifically, and BMD more generally, may be

a mechanism to encourage more routine integration and cooperation among the United States, South Korea, and Japan, which may help to overcome historical grievances and build a more durable trilateral U.S.-ROK-Japan relationship. U.S. diplomacy should emphasize to Beijing that China's inability to influence North Korea's nuclear program has contributed to the perceived need for more-robust BMD, which could lead, as an unintended consequence, to improved bilateral and trilateral alliance relationships.

THAAD has seized China's attention and received its condemnation, and likely will continue to do so into the future. South Korea and the United States decided to deploy THAAD after years of attempts by China and other members of the Six-Party Talks to rein in North Korea's nuclear and ballistic-missile ambitions. Owing to its proximity to and political and economic relationships with North Korea, China has appeared to be the country with the most leverage on Pyongyang, but even its influence has failed to restrain Kim Jong Un. In the absence of efforts by China to end North Korea's nuclear brinkmanship, the United States and its allies must use both military and diplomatic tools to defend themselves and shape the security environment. It is reasonable for the United States and South Korea to deploy THAAD—a defensive weapon—to defend their forces against new and challenging North Korean threats. It will not spark an arms race in what already is one of the world's most militarized areas. It does not threaten China's nuclear deterrent. It—perhaps—would improve bilateral and trilateral U.S. alliance relationships in Northeast Asia.

The United States has deployed THAAD to South Korea despite China's objections. The Trump administration should take several interrelated steps to maximize THAAD's value as a policy tool, not just as a defensive weapon system. To address the first two Chinese criticisms about THAAD, Washington should emphasize the deployment's defensive nature and allay Beijing's concerns about BMD's impact on its nuclear force. Recognizing the importance China attaches to THAAD's potential influence on bilateral and trilateral alliance relationships, the United States also should emphasize that deploying THAAD was necessary, in part, because China has not used its influence successfully with North Korea to end the latter's nuclear weapons program.

For this approach to be effective, however, the United States must do more than just employ THAAD in South Korea. The United States should emphasize THAAD's potential effect on regional alliances to spur Chinese cooperation in ending North Korea's nuclear threat. Alliances have been a source of American strength since the end of World War II and remain particularly relevant to the nuclear standoff with North Korea. America has five treaty allies in Asia alone, including South Korea and Japan, while China, for comparison, has only one

ally worldwide—North Korea. Improving U.S. alliance relationships with South Korea and Japan would send an unmistakable signal to Chinese leaders that their apparent inability to rein in North Korea has tangible outcomes that are contrary to China's interests. THAAD has tremendous potential to reshape the dynamics of U.S. alliances in Northeast Asia, but only as part of what should be a concerted diplomatic effort to strengthen alliance relationships. THAAD could contribute to closer defense cooperation in Northeast Asia, but deploying a U.S. BMD system cannot spark this evolution by itself.

The United States should not take South Korea—its democratic ally and THAAD's host—for granted. THAAD is a politically significant issue there, and was a factor in the election of Moon Jae-in, who campaigned as a THAAD skeptic. The United States should work closely with President Moon to convey the utility and value of THAAD to the South Korean people, while also respecting agreements made by previous administrations about THAAD's funding. Demands that Seoul renegotiate financial details of THAAD's already-controversial deployment might only inflame THAAD's South Korean opponents and undercut assurances of America's commitment to its ally.

During his campaign Moon criticized the accelerated deployment of THAAD, but suggested that "if South Korea can have more time to process this matter democratically, the U.S. will gain a higher level of trust from South Koreans and, therefore, the alliance between the two nations will become even stronger."<sup>130</sup> The United States should have the strategic patience and diplomatic savvy to earn this "higher level of trust" from South Korea. Furthermore, U.S.-ROK relations are not limited to the military alliance. Trade, for example, is another important aspect of bilateral ties that should be encouraged similarly, through consistent policies and trusting relationships. Renegotiating financial aspects of THAAD's deployment or the Korea-U.S. Free Trade Agreement, as the Trump administration has proposed, may signal that America's commitment to South Korea is conditional, which would not be likely to build trust in bilateral relations.

The United States should consider THAAD as more than an end unto itself, seeing it instead as part of a comprehensive strategy to cultivate and bolster alliance relationships in Northeast Asia. China's objections to THAAD in South Korea indicate that Beijing considers alliances to be a source of U.S. strength in Northeast Asia and fears that THAAD could bolster these alliances. Thomas Christensen wrote of the 1996 Taiwan Strait crisis that a "robust U.S. security presence and commitment to East Asia, in the proper context, can incentivize China to behave more moderately toward its neighbors."<sup>131</sup> Similarly, THAAD might enable the United States to demonstrate its continued security commitment to allies in East Asia and incentivize China to urge North Korea to curb its nuclear ambitions. Strengthening the bilateral U.S.-ROK alliance while bolstering



the trilateral U.S.-ROK-Japan relationship could amplify this effect. If THAAD has this positive impact on U.S. alliances but Beijing remains unable to constrain Pyongyang's nuclear ambitions, improved relationships with Seoul and Tokyo still would strengthen Washington's position in future diplomatic efforts. To derive these potential political benefits from THAAD's deployment, however, U.S. commitments to allies in Northeast Asia should be explicit and enduring, not ambiguous and transactional.

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#### NOTES

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