**Should South Korea Co-operate with the US on Missile Defense?**

By Kang Choi

It is time for South Korea to become clear on missile defense and cross the red line. Delay and ambiguity on whether or not it should co-operate with the US cannot serve South Korea’s national security interests. Rather, they will bring about more confusion and problems with both Washington and Beijing.

---

By Wooksik Cheong

What South Korea needs to do is to break the vicious cycle of upping its defensive measures in reaction to North Korea escalating its nuclear weapons program and vice versa. The answer is relatively simple: to co-operate with China to open the way to new Six-Party Talks.
Missile Defense: The Myth of Strategic Ambiguity
By Kang Choi

Since the mid-1990s, missile defense has been a controversial security issue in South Korea. Over the years, as the North Korean missile threat has increased, the United States has underscored that it wants South Korea to co-operate with the US on missile defense. But in response, South Korea, unlike Japan, has refused to join the US-led missile defense system in Northeast Asia, instead opting to build its own independent missile defense system, known as Korea Air and Missile Defense (KAMD). In recent weeks, however, a slight, but important, change in South Korea’s position on missile defense has been detected: that is, while maintaining a separate and independent missile defense system, South Korea now says it will co-operate with the US over missile defense “interoperability.” As a result, it is now possible to say that South Korea maintains “strategic ambiguity” over missile defense co-operation with the US.

Against this backdrop, recent remarks by United States Forces Korea (USFK) commander General Curtis Scaparrotti made a big splash in South Korea. At a forum hosted by the Korea Institute for Defense Analyses Scaparrotti said, “There was consideration being taken in order to consider THAAD [the US military’s Terminal High-Altitude Area Defense anti-ballistic missile system] being deployed here in Korea. It is a US initiative, and in fact, I recommended it as the commander.” Perhaps aware that his remarks could be misinterpreted to mean that this was a unilateral US decision and that Washington was pressuring South Korea to join the US-led missile defense system, he added, “It is now in a very initial states and the final decision will be made after close discussion with South Korea.” Finally, taking into account possible Chinese reactions, as well as concerns within South Korea that it was being squeezed between the US and China, Scaparrotti emphasized, “This is a very defensive system central on the defense of the Republic of Korea.” Despite the general’s efforts to fine tune his remarks, the contentious debate over missile defense is now very likely to resume again in Seoul.

PARTICIPATION VS. CO-OPERATION
Whether South Korea should participate in the US-led missile defense system and whether it should co-operate with the US are, in fact, wholly different questions. The former means that South Korea’s missile defense would become part of a US system aimed primarily at protecting US security interests, the latter means that South Korea would use parts of the US missile defense system to protect itself more effectively from North Korean missile threats. In essence, South Korea is co-operating with the US and should enhance such co-operation further to safeguard itself from ever-increasing North Korean missile threats.

South Korea began to modernize and upgrade its missile defense system in the mid-2000s, and is now pursuing KAMD, introduced during the administration of President Lee Myung-bak. Before that, South Korea had been primarily concerned with the threat of North Korean artillery. But with the threat of missiles from Pyongyang mounting, South Korea realizes the need to have more reliable missile defenses. There is a general consensus over the necessity of missile defense. To ensure and enhance the reliability and effectiveness of its missile defense, South Korea should further enhance the interoperability and integration of its own missile defense with that of the US, at least in the area known as Intelligence Surveillance Reconnaissance (ISR), if not in missiles themselves. By having more interoperable and integrated ISR systems, the detection and early warning capability of KAMD would be enhanced. It would thus allow South Korea and the US to neutralize, or at least reduce, North Korea’s missile threats. It would also have a significant deterrent effect vis-à-vis North Korea by showing the integrity and robustness of the South Korea-US combined defense posture, even after the transfer of wartime operational control to South Korea. And it would further increase South Korea’s strategic value within the alliance system and enable South Korea to speak with a greater voice.

STRATEGIC AMBIGUITY VS. STRATEGIC CLARITY
If greater co-operation by South Korea with the US missile defense system as outlined above would yield such results, we may wonder why South Korea has been reluctant to talk publicly about missile defense and has maintained strategic ambiguity over the issue. The main reason is South Korea’s concern over possible Chinese reaction. But South Korea cannot maintain strategic ambiguity indefinitely while co-operating with the US. Instead, it should make a strategic decision to clear up suspicions coming from both sides — the US and China. In other words, South Korea should be firm and clear on missile defense by saying that it will both unilaterally and in a combined manner do whatever is necessary to protect its people and safeguard national security interests, including in the area of missile defense.

It is well known that China has been very critical of US missile defense in general, but especially when it comes to Northeast Asia. It has argued against the building of any anti-Chinese coalition led by the US. And it has been very critical towards the South Korea-US alliance, describing it as a relic of the Cold War that should be dismantled. If South Korea joins, or co-operates with, the US-led missile defense system, China would interpret it as an act by South Korea to join an anti-Chinese coalition through a “virtual alliance” of the US, Japan and South Korea. China has consistently argued that trilateral security co-operation among these three countries is designed to contain and antagonize China and to perpetuate the US-centered regional security architecture.
For South Korea, China is a “(comprehensive) strategic co-operation partner” for two reasons: North Korea, and economy and trade. South Korea needs Chinese co-operation in solving its problems with North Korea, including the nuclear issue. To secure Chinese support and co-operation in solving problems with North Korea, over the years South Korea has been very passive, or even silent, on a number of controversial issues, including missile defense, so as not to provoke China. It is doubtful, however, whether such a policy of appeasement has been successful in securing Chinese co-operation in solving North Korean problems. On the contrary, South Korea’s co-operation with the US over missile defense might move China toward a direction we desire by putting more pressure upon China.

South Korea is, however, concerned about possible indirect Chinese reactions, mostly in the area of trade and the economy, should South Korea further strengthen co-operation with the US on missile defense. China is South Korea’s No. 1 trading partner, and the volume of trade is likely to grow further. Anything that might jeopardize trade relations between the two countries would be a great concern for South Korea. Missile defense is one of them. China might react in a non-military manner, mostly in economic and trade relations, while denying any connection between the two, as it did toward Japan by banning the export of rare earth materials to Japan during a period of heightened tensions. If China did such a thing, of course, that would actually undermine the credibility of China as a comprehensive strategic co-operation partner for South Korea. South Korea should make this point clear.

In a word, South Korea is very reluctant to cross the line on missile defense co-operation with the US at the moment. But, to safeguard its vital national security interests, South Korea should overcome its so-called “China complex” and display a sense of self-integrity to China by making itself clear and firm on sensitive issues, including missile defense. Such a position would enhance South Korea’s reputation in the international community and work for South Korea in dealing with China in the coming era: short-term loss, but long-term gain.

**WHAT ACTION SHOULD SOUTH KOREA TAKE, AND HOW?**

South Korea should do whatever is necessary to protect itself from the increasing missile threat from North Korea. An excess of political considerations and strategic ambiguity are not likely to serve South Korea’s national security interests. Rather, they might invite suspicions from both Washington and Beijing.

South Korea should seek further co-operation with the US to enhance the reliability and effectiveness of its missile defense system, starting from ISR interoperability. In addition, South Korea should seriously consider the deployment of THAAD by USFK to strengthen forward defense of the US as an ally. This will enhance combined deterrence vis-à-vis North Korea and provide a so-called crisis management room (crisis stability). Being safeguarded by missile defense, we would be in a better position to exercise escalation control and to have more options to respond in the event of a crisis. In addition, it would increase South Korea’s strategic value for the US and establish South Korea’s role as a trusted and equal partner of the US.

It is time for South Korea to become clear on missile defense and cross the red line. Delay and ambiguity cannot serve South Korea’s national security interests. Rather, they will bring about more confusion and problems.

Kang Choi is Vice President of the Asan Institute in Seoul.