The Debate

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.
The Debate: Kang

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.1 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.”2 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.”3 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.4

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 Reconnaisance (ISR), if not in missiles themselves.5 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.

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.

1 Depending upon its basic orientation, each South Korean administration has a different position toward missile defense: the Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun administrations were anti, whereas the Lee Myung-bak administration was slightly pro.
2 Interoperability in missile defense was mentioned and agreed at the 45th US Security Consultative Meeting in October 2013 in Seoul. President Park Geun-hye mentioned it again at the press conference following her summit meeting with President Obama in Seoul on April 25, 2014.
3 Even before this, there was a debate over whether South Korea should acquire an upper tier of missile defense (SM-3), going beyond the existing system of lower-tier missile defense (PAC-3). Currently the South Korean government is believed to have no plan to introduce the THAAD system. Instead it has a plan to develop a long-range surface-to-air missile (L-SAM) of its own.
4 For further details, see Professor Park Hwee-Rak, “Active Missile Defense for South Korea,” New Asia, Vol. 16, No. 3 (Fall 2009), pp. 88-115.
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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.

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By Wooksik Cheong

MUST SOUTH KOREA join the current US-led missile defense program? What would it stand to gain or lose by doing so? If the losses are seen to be much greater than the gains, what are the alternatives? In this essay, I seek to explore the answers to these three questions.

To begin, let us examine the first question. Since the United States officially requested South Korea to participate in its missile defense program in 1999, the four South Korean governments since then have maintained a position that can be summed up as, “We have no intention of joining.” But behind that policy is the hidden truth that South Korea has already been undergoing a deep assimilation into missile defense.

During the Kim Dae-jung administration, a Combined and Joint Theater Missile Operations Cell (CJTMOC) was created as an organ to conduct combined South Korea-US theater missile defense operations. Under President Roh Moo-hyun, the US deployed the latest Patriot missile system (PAC-3) alongside mobile early warning radar at the Osan and Kunsan air bases. These moves during the Kim-Roh era of liberal government were an outcome of the US taking advantage of its superior position in the alliance rather than through the willing actions of South Korea.

Under the Lee Myung-bak and Park Geun-hye administrations, these moves gained momentum. Four measures were taken during the Lee presidency, beginning in 2008 with the creation of an official South Korea-US bilateral consultative body on missile defense negotiations. Second, an extended deterrence committee was created. Third, the Pacific Dragon maritime ballistic missile tracking exercises began, not just between the US and South Korea but also with Japan. Lastly, there was a bilateral agreement on expanding the scope of missile defense co-operation from the Korean Peninsula to Japan and Guam. This was a result of accepting the US argument that in the case of an emergency these nations belong to a single integrated theater of operations.

The momentum has continued under President Park. To start with, the General Security of Military Information Agreement between South Korea and Japan, sidelined in Lee’s presidency for having been arranged in secret to avoid public scrutiny, is now being pushed ahead as a South Korea-US-Japan trilateral memorandum of understanding. Also, the decision to purchase PAC-3 was finalized, with some in the South Korean military also arguing for deployment of the advanced Terminal High-Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) and SM-3 systems designed for missile interception at higher altitudes. Of further note is the agreement at the 2013 and 2014 South Korea-US summits to improve missile defense interoperability. Moreover, the US has frequently dispatched SM-3-equipped Aegis-class warships in the vicinity of South Korea and is considering ground-based THAAD deployment as well.

Despite all of this, the South Korean Ministry of National Defense still officially denies being part of the US-led missile defense program. It says missile defense “bears no relationship to the South Korea-US-Japan information sharing deal.” Yet it is clear that the US and Japan are offering to share military intelligence in order to have South Korea join their missile defense program.

The crux of the trilateral military agreement is to share intelligence relevant to the detection and tracking of North Korean ballistic missiles. The success of missile defense depends on the prompt detection and tracking of any missiles launched, and to insist otherwise is an ostrich act.

The defense ministry argues, “A North Korean ballistic missile launched toward the continental United States flies in the direction of the North Pole, not ROK airspace, and no weapons system can intercept such a missile from South Korea, hence it does not follow that the ROK will become part of the US-led MD program.” But this argument only refers to systems designed to defend the continental United States. What the US and Japan want is South Korea to join their regional missile defense program by sharing intelligence on missile launches at the very least. South South Korea Co-operate with the US on Missile Defense?

Will missile defense teach Pyongyang the futility of nuclear missiles, prompting it to give up on them?

Has there been such a case in human history?

Korean Aegis-class vessels are equipped with SPY-1 radar, which is able to detect and trace ballistic missiles. Besides, South Korea is the US ally located nearest North Korea and China, which constitute the explicit and implicit targets, respectively, of the missile defense program.

I OPPOSE IT

Next, let me explain why I oppose South Korea’s participation in the US-led missile defense program. This is evident when we examine the reasons for the United States’ Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) treaty with the former Soviet Union in 1972. Although the treaty was repealed when the George W. Bush administration unilaterally withdrew from it, while it lasted the treaty was lauded as a cornerstone of international peace and stability. Strategic stability, its core principle, consists of two pillars: the first is to suppress an arms race, the second is crisis management. Missile defense, meanwhile, exacerbates competition in the development of offensive and defensive weapons, and precipitates mutual distrust, all while making crisis management difficult in times of escalation.

Then whether South Korea’s participation in missile defense? Will missile defense teach Pyongyang the futility of nuclear missiles, prompting it to give up on them? Has there been such a case in human history?

The past is said to be a mirror of the future. When the Reagan administration proposed its strategic defense initiative, satirized as “Star Wars” by critics, the Soviet Union responded by upping its nuclear stockpile and developing even more bizarre missile technologies. China is also considering a variety of responses to the US missile defense project, albeit to a lesser degree than the former Soviet Union. Just what is the rationale behind the belief that North Korea will be an exception? Is it not more likely that Pyongyang would build more and bigger nuclear weapons and missiles while employing its tactics of concealment and deception in response to the trilateral missile defense?

China regards South Korea’s participation in the missile defense program as the final straw for global asia Vol. 9, No. 2, Summer 2014
Sino-South Korea relations. Why? The worry that missile defense will make it hard to resolve the nuclear issue with North Korea and will aggravate the situation on the Korean Peninsula is just one explanation. The Chinese believe the US-led program is really aimed at China. This can be understood in light of the European situation: on the flipside of the Ukraine crisis is Russia’s resentment of NATO’s easterly advance alongside US missile defense. Likewise, China sees the US rebalancing in Asia as a strategy of containment and the US-led missile defense in East Asia as a concrete manifestation of the strategy.

South Korea is a US ally located close to the Chinese heartland. Further, the US is in the process of relocating its Yongsan headquarters and 2nd Infantry Division to the Pyeongtaek-Osan area for the sake of strategic flexibility. All of this is being done with the intention of intervening in case of Northeast Asian military conflicts. Simultaneously, to defend these installations, missile defense systems are being deployed and South Korea is being drawn into the program. China sees US intervention as a question of life or death in the case of conflict with Taiwan or Japan. China’s counter-US strategy will differ profoundly depending on the presence of a US-led missile defense program. That is why China is not indifferent to South Korea’s participation in missile defense.

In addition, should South Korea join the program, resulting economic burdens vastly outweigh any improvement in its defense. Due to the geographical characteristics of the Korean Peninsula, mountainous and lacking spatial depth, the game of “shooting down bullets with bullets” will only have a low probability of success.

Thoroughly considering all the factors — the deterioration of the North Korean nuclear situation, the risk to Sino-ROK relations and the profit-loss imbalance — missile defense is an unworthy endeavor, whether chosen voluntarily or under duress. One can point to the benefit of a strengthened South Korea-US alliance, but the alliance is only a means to pursue security and national interest, not an end in itself. Then what is the alternative? The answer can be borrowed from the wisdom of Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev in their peaceful cessation of the Cold War. The idea that one can become more secure by making others insecure is based on a one-sided “Cold War mentality.” That mentality led to tens of thousands more nuclear warheads and fiddling with missile defense without providing any added sense of security. The lesson was clear and costly: the quest for absolute security gives rise to absolute anxiety. To the contrary, the post-Cold War paradigm of common security is rooted in the concept that one can only be secure when the other party also feels secure.

**THE WAY FORWARD**

The problems of the Korean Peninsula, including the threat of North Korea, must also be approached with such a mentality. The narrow notion of trying to solve the nuclear problem by rendering North Korea less secure can only repeat the failures of the past. In this regard, missile defense will only make matters worse for South Korea without bringing any benefits.

Of course, deterrents are needed against North Korea, but missile defense exceeds the boundaries of deterrence, and as the saying goes, too much is no better than too little. We need a flexible posture in maintaining a firm yet disciplined deterrent, actively engaging in dialogue and negotiation, taking mutual threat reduction measures and ultimately transitioning from a Korean Peninsula armistice regime into a peace regime.

In truth, missile defense and Pyongyang’s nuclear weapons are two monsters that grew up side by side over 20 years. The 1994 Agreed Framework between North Korea and the US was unexpectedly confronted by the Republican Party’s platform of offering missile defense as its foremost diplomatic and security policy. The ill-starred relationship between missile defense and Pyongyang’s nuclear weapons deepened in 1998 with the Rumsfeld Commission Report and Pyongyang’s long-range missile launch and reached its peak in 2001 with George W. Bush’s election win. His administration needed a pretext to justify missile defense, and North Korea’s timely brandishing of nuclear weapons played right into US hands. Unfortunately, that cycle has continued into the Obama administration.

South Korea needs to break the vicious cycle of South Korea getting trapped more deeply into US-led missile defense in reaction to the expansion of North Korea’s nuclear weapons capability and vice versa. The answer is closer than one might imagine: to co-operate with China to open the way again to Six-Party Talks. Arguing that these are of no use is a sign of ignorance not only to history but also to diplomacy, which is of course “the art of the possible.” Opening the door to the Six-Party Talks again will allow us to suppress the mutually reinforcing proliferation of nuclear weapons and missile defense systems. Once we temporarily freeze Pyongyang’s nuclear program, we can also eventually terminate the program. Moreover, the eventual objective of the Six-Party talks is to forge a peace regime not just on the Korean Peninsula but in Northeast Asia.

In other words, the alternative to missile defense is Six-Party Talks, an approach that still retains sufficient value. Why reject something that has yet to be fully and properly tried?

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