



Questioning the implementation of THAAD system in South Korea:

Impacts of the « hit-to-kill » strategy within a region marked by power struggles and Pyongyang's nuclear threat

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INTRODUCTION

Following the launch of a North Korean missile on February 6th 2016, the U.S. and South Korea's military officials announced the opening of discussions about THAAD implementation in South Korea. This system is aimed to destroy ballistic missiles of short and medium range and has already been displayed in Qatar and Saudi Arabia. The latter is supposed to be effective in 2017 on the South Korean territory and is based on two key words: precision and mobility. The system is therefore described as being one of the most effective missile-defence system in the world. While the Defence Ministry of the U.S. does not give details about the areas that should be protected by the shield, Beijing, on the other side, pretends that U.S.' strategies within the peninsula are part of a containment strategy against China's rise. This commentary will analyse the multiple implications of such a military dispositive, which highlights – and maybe reinforces - the power rivalries in Asia-Pacific.

THE SPECTRE OF COLD WAR STRATEGIES AND ALLIANCES

Despite the absence of Mutually Assured Destruction in the

present case, the development of THAAD system in South Korea reinforces pre-existing tensions within the region, and carries the risk to step up arms race between the regional powers. As China and Russia underlined it, they are both opposed to the THAAD deployment, especially because they consider the latter as a threat to their sovereignty. As a consequence, Moscow insisted on the fact that it will take into account the deployment of such a shield in its military planning. While North Korea's last nuclear tests and missiles launches seem to have helped South Korea's government - in the way that those elements give more reasons for Seoul to deepen the cooperation with Washington on THAAD deployment - the situation has also reinforced cooperation between China and North Korea. Indeed, they exchanged coded messages on July, 11th 2016, following the 55th anniversary of the bilateral Treaty of friendship, cooperation and mutual assistance. As a consequence, the alliances in the region are quickly evolving towards a structure which is – ideologically speaking – pretty similar to Cold War alliances, meaning an opposition between one bloc (constituted by North Korea, China and Russia) and another one, based on the U.S.,

South Korea and eventually Japan. Of course, such alliances are not as straight as they were during the Cold War. But the balance of power shows troubling similarities, reinforced by The Declaration of the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China on the Promotion of International Law, of June 25th, 2016.

A COUNTERSTRATEGY TO SANCTIONS' LACK OF EFFICIENCY?

Despite the several warnings of the International Community, North Korea proceeded to a nuclear test on February 6th 2016. As a consequence, new heavy economic sanctions were announced by Washington. Those measures were directed against the nuclear developments of North Korea, but also against its violations of human rights. Unfortunately, it seems that sanctions are not necessarily an effective way to deal with Rogue States. While implementing political and military strategies based on the logic of State survival, North Korea does not really show any fear of sanctions. The reasons are multiple, from the nature of the regime to the several ways to get around sanctions. The Panama Papers' affair which was fully exposed in 2016 was

a good example. Moreover, sanctions tend to reinforce isolationist strategies, and by consequence, they also reinforce the regime itself. As Raymond Tanter perfectly sums up: "Talk to me, I may go nuclear"¹ Moreover, according to the regime security theory, coercive diplomacy (including trade sanctions, diverse threats and military actions) are ineffective measures in preventing proliferation.² Despite those facts, Washington insists on the idea that THAAD system is an essential dispositive in order to dissuade North Korea from acquiring more nuclear weapons. But unfortunately for Washington's strategy, there are serious doubts about the effectiveness of the THAAD shield. Finally, the biggest risk of that coercive strategy is to compromise any single chance to resolve the conflict by diplomatic ways, meaning dialogue.³ Indeed, Pyongyang reacted by declaring that there will be a physical answer to such a military deployment in South Korea.

REINFORCING THE LOGIC OF MUTUAL DISTRUST IN THE PENINSULA: THE STRATEGIC CALCULUS BETWEEN IMPERIALISM ACCUSATIONS AND ARMS RACE

The debates about THAAD deployment in South Korea take place in a region which is already unstable. While China is trying to impose its sovereignty claims in the South China Sea, the balance of power is slowly evolving, mitigated by distrust and tensions, meaning instability and a lack of security within the region. While China has a strategic interest over there, the country also carries the fear of being tracked by the U.S.

Moreover, Beijing estimates that THAAD system could neutralize its own strike force.⁴ But despite Chinese arguments, it seems that the interception system does not really threatens the security of the country. Indeed, as The Heritage Foundation demonstrated, the system is unable to counter the biggest part of Chinese ballistic missiles.⁵ The first

fear of China is to see its own missile system based on A2/AD capabilities weakened by THAAD. Washington's reaction has been clear on that point, expressing that the Chinese system was already hostile by itself, because based on what is called "antiaccess / area denial" capabilities.⁶

It seems more reasonable to understand China's stances as key elements taking part within a strategy which is aimed to destabilize the alliance between the United States and South Korea. By playing on the politically correct aspect of THAAD deployment, Beijing is trying to lead the cooperation between Seoul and Washington to a political stalemate. This strategy is partly aimed to slow down the United States' alliances within the region. Indeed, those last few years, Washington has reinforced diverse alliances with Asia-Pacific countries, to the great displeasure of China.

Beijing and Moscow agree on the point that such a dispositive could reinforce the arms race in North Asia. Moreover, China and Russia both emphasize the possibility THAAD's radars could spy on their own territory. Once again, distrust is at stake, and the deepening cooperation between Washington and Seoul does not help increasing confidence between powers. One should not neglect the economic consequences of such a deployment for South Korea, which would probably face a slowdown in its trade relations with China.⁷

As a response to the growing presence of the U.S. in the region, China is bolstering its sea-based nuclear deterrent and tries to reinforce its alliances as a counter-strategy. And while the latter considers North Korea territory as a natural barrier to protect its heartland,⁸ the United States, South Korea and Japan see North Korea as a Rogue State, with an irrational and risky-acceptant leader, carrying serious threats to regional stability. Here lies the mutual distrust logic, but also the mutual survival strategies, which are "driving military build-ups on both sides of

the 38th parallel"⁹ based on a mutual logic of survival.

ELEMENTS OF CONCLUSION: DEALING WITH PRIDE AND SURVIVAL

First of all, the South Korean people's reactions have been mainly negative, underlying societal impacts of such a military deployment. A desire of emancipation from the U.S has gradually emerged, insisting on the fact that since the signature of the Treaty of Mutual Assistance in 1954, South Korea has gradually lost its sovereignty. Since then, the country has tried to build self-reliant military capabilities but stills dependent on Washington's nuclear umbrella.

Some negative effects have been pointed out, as negative consequences on military, diplomatic and economic aspects. Obviously, once the THAAD shield will be deployed in South Korea, the latter will have to face some difficulties to ask the cooperation and support of China and Russia, especially regarding the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula. But as underlined by Park Geun-Hye, "national security (or survival) overrides economic interests".¹⁰ Despite last improvements in the relationship between China and South Korea, the THAAD deployment has undermined the mutual trust between the two powers.

The first consequences of such a deployment would be feeding tensions but also reinforcing aggressive postures of several States as North Korea and China. Recent events have already underlined the nature of pressures and power distribution in the region, especially China's reaction to the judgement of the International Court of Justice regarding the rejection of Beijing's claims over disputed waters with Philippines.

Finally, far from obtaining the researched effects on Pyongyang's attitude, THAAD shield would probably only strengthen the aggressiveness of the regime. Without a concrete and strong alliance between Chi-

na, Russia and United States on the question of their own nuclear arsenals, it seems doubtful that the three powers will ever find an agreement regarding North Korea's own nuclear power. According to a realist point of view, North Korea will never give up on its own nuclear program, while bigger powers still possess the nuclear privilege and develop tactical nuclear weapons. Pride and survival are key elements at stake. This is such a paradox: China stresses the necessity to denuclearize the Peninsula, while the country has its own nuclear arsenal, despite that the latter is usually seen as being deterrence-oriented and based on a limited number of warheads. Such a power fosters national pride. The fact is that both China and the U.S. also estimate being in charge of the overall security in the region. "China has always been interested in its ability to influence its neighbours."¹¹ While Beijing uses its peripheral diplomacy, Washington is not willing to give up on its intents to gain regional leadership.

Talking about scenarios, as Tom Sauer explained brilliantly¹², the debate about the question is based between what he calls the ABM Crowd and the BMD Gurus. While the partisans of the first group estimate that defensive weapons are contradictory with the elimination of nuclear weapons, the BMD Gurus' partisans emphasize the complementarity of the two elements. This commentary paper assumes the same position as the ABM Crowd's theory, reaffirming the necessity to dismantle every missile system, either defensive or offensive, in order to avoid arms race. As long as the United States will keep its nuclear warheads, it is very unlikely to see powers like China and Russia give up on their own nuclear arsenal. Indeed, universality is an indisputable condition in order to reach a world without nuclear weapons.¹³ But this would also imply giving up on national doctrines. Finally, the whole situation lies on a vicious circle. As long as China will not cooperate directly with the U.S., sanctions and pressures will not be sufficient in order to

attract Pyongyang at the negotiation table. More pressures will obviously lead to more resistance. And as long as China will feel its own strategic interests threatened by Washington's strategies, the negotiations are doomed to a stalemate.¹⁴ Obviously, as long pride and prestige will drive States' interest, it seems doubtful to see any peaceful and credible solution emerging regarding the nuclear dilemma.¹

1 Despite the statements of the present commentary, one should not neglect the positive aspects of a hypothetical THAAD deployment in South Korea. Indeed, such a dispositive could help South Korea to protect itself better, knowing that Chinese interests in maintaining North Korea stability as much as possible will probably lead Seoul to defend itself without the support of Beijing. Finally, a common threat calls for a multilateral response, meaning a collaborative defense system between the United States and South Korea, despite the negative consequences that such a symbolic deployment would certainly have.

(ENDNOTES)

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13 *Ibid.*

14 "Corée du Sud. Un bouclier américain contre les missiles du Nord", *Op. Cit.*