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Keeping the Americans in: The THAAD deployment on the Korean peninsula in the context of Sino-American rivalry

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ABSTRACT
Seoul and Washington have conceded that Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) in South Korea cannot protect the capital region of Republic of Korea (ROK), including Seoul and Incheon, from North Korea’s missile attacks. Why did the South Korean government decide to deploy THAAD, risking possible retaliation from China, although it already knew its limited utility on the Korean peninsula? This article addresses the puzzle by connecting the deployment of THAAD in South Korea with the U.S. conception of a strategic rebalancing to Asia. By linking South Korea’s decision to deploy THAAD with contemporary alliance politics, extended deterrence, and abandonment and entrapment risks, it argues that Seoul’s THAAD decision was primarily intended to sustain and strengthen the U.S.-ROK alliance amid escalating nuclear threats by North Korea and deepening Sino-American rivalry.

KEYWORDS
THAAD; rebalancing to Asia; U.S.-ROK alliance; extended deterrence; abandonment and entrapment risks

The July 2016 decision of South Korea (henceforth also referred to as the Republic of Korea, or ROK) to deploy the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system on its soil created “one of the biggest points of friction in Northeast Asia” (Klug, 2017). Internally, mass protests against the deployment were triggered across the country. The largest external impact was the strong backlash from China, which responded by placing an unprecedented level of sanctions on South Korea, despite Seoul and Washington’s repeated assertion that the anti-ballistic missile defense was not intended to target Chinese missiles (Panda, 2016). However, at the same time, both Seoul and Washington conceded that THAAD could not protect the capital region of ROK, including Seoul and Incheon, home to more than half of South Korea’s population, from such attacks (Kim, 2017, p. 314). Knowing of its insufficiency against the named threat, why did South Korea
nevertheless decide to deploy THAAD on its territory, risking possible retaliation from China?

In this article, I provide a solution to this puzzle by connecting the deployment of THAAD in South Korea with the U.S. conception of a strategic rebalancing or the so-called pivot to Asia, arguing that Seoul’s THAAD decision was primarily intended to sustain and strengthen the U.S.-ROK alliance amid escalating nuclear threats by North Korea and deepening Sino-American rivalry. Although some scholars have acknowledged the important role played by the desire to maintain the U.S.-ROK alliance in the decision by the Park Geun-hye administration to deploy THAAD, little research has been done to clarify the correlation between that decision and the recent developments corresponding to the change in the U.S. policy toward Asia (Goh, 2015; Kim, 2017; Kim & Park, 2019). This article, by contrast, places the current state of the alliance at the center of its investigation into this controversial issue, paying particular heed to the ongoing adjustments being made between the two powers to better cope with the rise of China. Thus, by examining the underlying causes of the THAAD decision, this article can also contribute to an understanding of the reconfiguration of the alliance amid the growing rivalry between the United States and China.

The South Korean government took the decision to deploy THAAD because of its concern about the North Korean threat, in particular due to the escalation in its nuclear and missile tests in 2015 and 2016. Acknowledging North Korea to be a major reason for the THAAD deployment, this article adds that Seoul’s decision was in line with Washington’s push to use its ally to check and counter the military expansion of China. The United States, in line with its rebalancing strategy, pressed ahead with the construction of missile defense systems on the territory of its East Asian allies in hopes of containing China’s military buildup. THAAD, a critical part of these systems, was installed on the Korean peninsula not only to protect South Korea from the North Korean threat but also to maintain and strengthen U.S. hegemony at the global level by, for instance, providing an additional layer of protection for U.S. territories and, importantly, U.S. forces stationed in East Asia and the western Pacific to help neutralize China’s anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) capabilities.

Although Washington had repeatedly suggested joint missile defense since the early 2000s, Seoul had long remained noncommittal, largely to protect its relationship with Beijing (Sankaran & Fearney, 2017, pp. 322–325). If South Korea’s security concerns about North Korean nuclear and missile programs was the sole determining factor for the deployment of a missile defense system, the initial tests of nuclear weapons that North Korea conducted in the mid-2000s should have spurred it to join the U.S. missile defense at that time. Those tests shocked South Korea to a much greater degree than the follow-up ones a decade later. The deployment of THAAD in 2016 was
an important achievement for the U.S. rebalancing strategy, which successfully induced South Korea to participate in missile defense based upon improved interoperability among the United States, Japan, and South Korea. Conceptually, this article links South Korea’s decision to deploy THAAD with contemporary alliance politics in relation to extended deterrence and abandonment and entrapment risks. First, the deployment of THAAD on the peninsula itself may improve the security of South Korea by enhancing the credibility of U.S. extended deterrence through its contribution to the defense of U.S. territories and U.S. forces in East Asia and the western Pacific. Second, the United States, following its rebalancing strategy, applied increasing pressure on South Korea to install THAAD on its soil, which decided to comply owing to much higher costs of abandonment of the alliance in the face of, most of all, possible nuclear attacks by North Korea. Technically, unlike what the South Korean government has publicly claimed, THAAD has only limited direct utility for the protection of South Koreans from North Korean missile. However, the THAAD deployment can contribute to its national security in a strategic way by reinforcing the U.S.-ROK alliance.

In the following section, this article briefly reviews earlier studies of the deployment of THAAD to South Korea. Then, as technical evidence to support my argument, it examines the utility of a missile defense system on the peninsula, followed by a discussion of extended deterrence and the dilemma between abandonment and entrapment risks. Next, it explains, first, the relationship between THAAD on the peninsula and the credibility of U.S. extended-deterrence strategy and, second, Washington’s rebalancing strategy and the increasing pressure on Seoul to allow the THAAD deployment through the lens of abandonment and entrapment risks. This article concludes by briefly discussing some implications of the research.

**Debates about THAAD**

Most studies on the THAAD deployment to South Korea can be roughly classified into one of three categories. In the first category are those contending that the deployment is exclusively intended, as stated, to protect South Korea from North Korea’s growing nuclear and missile capabilities, not to check and counter China. Those in the second and third categories are skeptical of THAAD’s ability to protect South Koreans from North Korea’s missile attacks. Instead, they argue that the presence of THAAD on the peninsula could play a critical role in providing a check on China’s rising military might. These two groups, however, are divided as to how THAAD should be appraised in relation to the security of South Korea. The second one asserts that THAAD will be ineffective in defending South Korea or may even be detrimental to national security because it might turn China into
an antagonist, and the third one concentrates on THAAD’s indirect utility to South Korean security by providing security and strategic benefits for the United States, thus strengthening the U.S.-ROK alliance.

Studies in the first category argue that THAAD, part of an integrated, layered defense architecture, can offer good (although incomplete) protection for South Korea because it provides an additional layer of defense for strategically important U.S. and South Korean military bases. They contend that, having no good alternative to protect itself from its bellicose neighbor, Seoul was forced to deploy THAAD as early as possible, and Washington and Seoul have no intention to use it against Beijing. However, publications in this category differ in their assessment of the utility of THAAD, in particular its AN/TPY-2 radars (THAAD radars), for checking and countering Chinese military capabilities. Some scholars have argued that THAAD radars are would not be capable of tracking ballistic missiles launched from China toward the United States (Jeon, 2016; Park, 2016) or covering “the entire or even a substantial portion of the Chinese mainland,” as China fears (Sankaran & Fearey, 2017, p. 329). Others report that, even though South Korea’s THAAD radars can be diverted to detect and track China’s missiles, the United States will not use them against China because THAAD is deployed in South Korea “just against a very hostile and belligerent, nuclear-armed neighbor” (Swaine, 2010, p. 9) or because there are two THAAD radars already stationed in Japan that can detect and track Chinese launches (Hutchinson, 2016, p. 18).

The second group of studies asserts that the South Korean THAAD provides only very limited defense capabilities for South Korea, and it is primarily intended to defend the United States’ strategic interests in East Asia (Goh, 2015; Kim, 2017; Seo, 2015). Goh (2015), for example, contended that the main function of THAAD in South Korea is to keep missile bases in China under constant surveillance inspection, in accordance with U.S. military strategy vis-à-vis China. He stressed that South Korea would pay a high diplomatic price if it became an “outpost of the U.S. missile defense system in Northeast Asia.” In a similar vein, Kim (2017), claiming that THAAD has no potential to save South Korean lives, argued that the deployment would precipitate a geopolitical imbalance of strategic assets between the United States and China. According to him, a South Korea with THAAD could become a “trigger point for military conflicts between the United States and China.” To these authors, President Park’s decision to deploy THAAD was a catastrophic mistake and gravely detrimental to national interests, leading them to call for the withdrawal of THAAD from the Korean peninsula.

The third group agrees with the second, in that it concedes the limited usefulness of THAAD for protecting the South Korean people from North Korean missile attacks and its utility in advancing the United States’ strategic interests in East Asia. However, these studies argue that the deployment of
THAAD on the peninsula would be an important asset for South Korean security because it would shore up the U.S.-ROK alliance. Kim and Park (2019, p. 183), for example, after evaluating THAAD’s military capacity, argue that the defense value of THAAD, located in the middle of South Korea, is very low and short-lived because North Korea can use “readily available and relatively inexpensive countermeasures—decoys, tumbling and spiral motions, and outnumbering.” However, they cautioned against the withdrawal of THAAD because doing so could gravely cripple the U.S.-ROK alliance by undermining American military capacity vis-à-vis China, thus reducing the usefulness of the alliance.

This study falls into the third category. Although its approach is distinct from that of Kim and Park’s technology-based analysis, it takes particular note of the reconfiguration of the U.S.-ROK alliance that occurred at onset of the implementation of the U.S. rebalancing strategy, designed to contain China’s rise. In this article, I argue that the deployment of THAAD in South Korea, though not effective in itself as direct protection of South Korean people from North Korean missile attacks, nevertheless contributes to the security of South Korea by maintaining and reinforcing the U.S.-ROK alliance. This alliance plays a critical role in defending South Korea from the North Korean threat. If we consider Seoul’s adoption of the system in 2016 as merely a policy failure or a blunder, we cannot explain, for example, why President Moon Jae-in—even though his supporters largely opposed the deployment of THAAD in South Korea—upheld his predecessor’s decision and even allowed additional THAAD system launchers to be deployed in South Korea during his presidency.

**Limited utility of THAAD on the Korean peninsula**

In July 2016, Seoul and Washington announced that the existing Korea Air and Missile Defense (KAMD) focused on a terminal-phase, low-altitude missile defense. They argued that as THAAD was developed to detect and intercept missiles at medium and high altitudes, it would help complete a multi-layered defense against North Korea’s missiles and bolster their effective missile defense (Choe, 2016). However, many experts have shown THAAD’s limited military utility in shielding South Korea from North Korea’s missile attacks.

In the first place, it would be difficult to intercept North Korea’s short-range ballistic missiles, traveling between 300-1,000 kilometres, with THAAD. The KN-02 (Hwaseong-11) flies below THAAD’s intercept altitude. Also, the North Korean SCUD-B (Hwaseong-5) and SCUD-C (Hwaseong-6) can evade THAAD if they are launched at low trajectories from rear bases. The South Korean government justified the deployment of THAAD because it could intercept North Korea’s medium-range ballistic missiles,
travelling between 1,000-3,000 kilometres, such as its Nodong missiles. However, there is little chance that North Korea will use these, instead of the short-range ballistic missiles, to attack South Korea (Goh, 2015, p. 555). Furthermore, if North Korea wants to use Nodong missiles in particular, it can again incapacitate THAAD by launching them at low trajectories (Seo, 2015). That is, with both short-range ballistic missiles and medium-range ballistic missiles, North Korea can easily evade THAAD interception and reach South Korea.\(^1\) In fact, as early as 1999, the U.S. Defense Department submitted a report to lawmakers in Washington, saying that an endo-exo upper-tier system such as THAAD, which is situated on the Korean peninsula would not be able to intercept a North Korean ballistic missile aimed at South Korea’s capital region (U.S. Department of Defense, 1999, pp. 10–12). A report by the U.S. Congressional Research Service (CRS) in 2015 contended that a trilateral missile defense system among the United States, Japan and South Korea would not effectively defending South Korea itself (Rinehart, Hildreth, & Lawrence, 2015, p. 20).

Washington and Seoul argue that THAAD possesses sufficient military utility due to its ability to protect the United States Forces Korea (USFK). The United States can protect its own army with a missile defense system that operates across a multi-layered architecture to engage missiles at three phases of flight: boost, midcourse, and terminal (Klingner, 2015a). To intercept missiles at the boost phase, Washington once put into development a directed-energy laser, which was eventually found to be unrealistic in the present state of technology due to excessive technical and financial challenges. The USFK already had two PAC-3 systems in position to intercept missiles in the terminal phase. THAAD can intercept missiles during the midcourse and terminal phases and, therefore, it has unique utility in countering missiles in the midcourse phase. When Nodong missiles launch at a lofted angle, they fly at a much higher altitude than usual, putting them in a steep dive, with a maximum speed of Mach 7 in the terminal phase, such that the PAC-3 system cannot intercept them. On March 26, 2014, North Korea test-fired a Nodong missile that way, sending it for a distance of about 650 kilometres, instead of the expected 1,500 kilometres (Seo, 2015, p. 416).

After the Nodong missile test, Washington hastened to deploy THAAD on the peninsula under the pretext of protecting the USFK (Park, 2016, p. 7). General Curtis Scaparrotti, the commander of the USFK, first openly brought THAAD to the attention of South Korea, saying, at the Korea Institute for Defense Analyses in June 2014, that “There was consideration being taken in order to consider THAAD being deployed here in Korea. It is a U.S. initiative, and in fact, I recommended it as the commander” (Lee, 2014). The test-firing of the Nodong missile appeared to precipitate the deployment of THAAD to protect the USFK. However, this article argues that this remained a pretext because Pyongyang had many other models of missile besides the
Nodong that it could have used to attack the USFK. As mentioned earlier, THAAD cannot intercept North Korea’s short-range ballistic missiles, and it cannot counter Nodong missiles when they are launched at low trajectories.

Thus, the deployment of THAAD in South Korea offers only limited utility in protecting South Koreans and the USFK from North Korean missile attacks. Nonetheless, this article argues that Seoul’s decision to support the deployment of the missile defense system on the peninsula was nevertheless a considered choice based upon strategic considerations, namely, with the goal of strengthening the U.S.-ROK alliance to provide countervailing strength against Pyongyang’s nuclear and missile development programs.

Before the argument is presented in detail, the next section provides conceptual support, with the introduction of extended deterrence and the risk of abandonment and entrapment.

**Extended deterrence and the risks of abandonment and entrapment**

Extended deterrence is one means through which a patron state provides better security to its client state. Among allies, deterrence—defined as “an attempt to discourage an adversary from changing the status quo through threats of military force” (Fuhrmann, 2018, p. 52)—is extended from the patron state to the client state when the former provides dissuasion to a third party from launching an attack on the latter by threatening unbearable damage (Slocombe, 1984, pp. 93–94). Extended deterrence does not only benefit weaker allies. Powerful patron states benefit from extended deterrence as well, maintaining the status quo and ensuring their regional or global ascendency.

The patron state can face a credibility problem: Will it in fact deliver extended deterrence? Extended deterrence occurs both for conventional and nuclear arms. The credibility of extended deterrence is particularly salient when the third party has nuclear weapons and shows an intention to use them because it would not be easy for the patron state to retaliate due to the risk of a nuclear war. For example, Charles de Gaulle, President of France, suspected that the U.S. nuclear umbrella was not viable, asserting that the United States would not sacrifice New York to save Paris (Fuhrmann, 2018, pp. 52–53).

In the U.S.-ROK alliance, extended deterrence commitments became more intricate and complex in response to North Korea’s development of nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles. South Korea had relied on U.S. extended deterrence (both conventional and nuclear) for decades, discouraging North Korea from attacking South Korea by threatening it with the prospect of unendurable retaliation (Manning, 2014, pp. 12–14). However, it is increasingly questionable how committed Washington is to protect South Korea in the event of a nuclear attack from Pyongyang. If North Korean nuclear capabilities can
credibly threaten the United States, for example, by subjecting Los Angeles to a nuclear attack, a new element of nuclear brinkmanship will appear in the issues plaguing the Korean peninsula. Hence, more and more South Koreans are concerned about the credibility of U.S. extended deterrence due to the challenges posed by a nuclear North Korea. Some South Korean politicians and analysts have even publicly advocated the development of an independent nuclear deterrent due to their suspicion of the value of U.S. extended deterrence (Hong, 2016).

In alliance politics, the trade-off between security and autonomy dominates relationships among allies. The construction of an alliance intrinsically entails a trade-off between security and autonomy: An ally can maximize its security by forming an alliance, but this inevitably requires the curtailment of autonomy (Snyder, 1984, 1997). In negotiating this security—autonomy trade-off, member states of alliances are exposed to the risk of abandonment and entrapment. It is not only weaker allies that subject to these risks. Stronger allies, and even patron states in their own right, are subject to them, albeit to not as much so.

As Snyder (1984, p. 466) has argued, abandonment takes one of the following three forms. First, an ally may officially abrogate the alliance agreement and become a non-aligned state or instead form an alliance with a former rival state. Second, it may choose not to abide by the alliance agreement, if not abrogate it. Third, it may withhold support from the alliance partner in contingencies where support is explicitly required. Entrapment, then is the risk of becoming involved in “conflict over an ally’s interests that one does not share, or shares only partially” (Snyder, 1984, p. 467), such that every member of an alliance is afraid of the possibility that it is entrapped in unwanted international conflicts. To cope with the risks of entrapment, an ally can keep the alliance partner at a distance or threaten to do so, weaken or minimize alliance commitments through renegotiation, or ease strained relations between the alliance partner and its adversary through proactive diplomacy, including direct or indirect mediation (Snyder, 1997, pp. 185–186). Finally, it can opt to risk abandonment, on the assumption that the cost of entrapment surpasses that of abandonment.

The risks of abandonment and entrapment vary inversely, and this leads to an alliance-security dilemma: policies to decrease the risk of abandonment increase the risk of entrapment, and vice versa (Snyder, 1997, p. 181). States, due to their limited resources and capacity, have only bounded discretion in foreign policy-making, and thus they must take risks to obtain specific policy priorities. As alliance participants seek a compromise, the status of the security dilemma is critical to alliance participants because it correlated with the degree of risk.

In determining the level of the security dilemma in the alliance, this article pays particular attention to the ideas of shared interests, asymmetrical
dependence, and explicitness in alliance commitments in the formation and maintenance of alliances. First, the level of the security dilemma decreases as the interests that allies share increases. When they do not have shared interests with respect to a particular issue, allies have more serious concerns about being drawn into unwanted conflicts than in other cases. Second, asymmetries in military capabilities between allies can cause the weaker ally to depend more on the alliance partner in relation to defense and security concerns. The greater the difference in military capabilities, the higher the level of asymmetrical dependence. Here, the weaker partner’s fear of abandonment will outweigh its fear of entrapment, magnifying the security dilemma. Third, the degree of explicitness of the commitment that the members make to the alliance determines the level of the alliance security dilemma. For example, the more explicit the commitments, the less probable the abandonment and the more probable the entrapment (Snyder, 1984, pp. 471–477, 1997, pp. 186–192).

The alliance security dilemma is at a very high level for contemporary South Korea for the following reasons. First, Seoul’s shared interests with Washington in the latter’s intention to balance China are not large. South Korea has had a few territorial disputes with China, such including one over Ieodo, or Socotra Rock, south of Jeju Island, but they are not at issue for the present (Sakaki & Nishino, 2018, pp. 744–747). Rather, in addition to economic questions, where China is its largest trading partner, South Korea recognizes that it needs help from China to resolve problems with North Korea, whether unification or denuclearization, although China has thus far been of little help. Therefore, South Korea has a great deal to lose by being a partner to moves taken to check and counter China, which risk antagonizing it. Second, the United States has an overwhelming superiority of military power over South Korea. South Korea’s defense capabilities alone cannot safely protect its people from North Korean nuclear attacks. The obvious asymmetry in military capabilities between the two countries has significantly enhanced the level of South Korea’s dependence on the United States for national security. Third, the U.S.-ROK alliance includes very explicit commitments concerning the existence of communist North Korea, and therefore, South Korea’s risk of abandonment is very high. With a high-intensity alliance security dilemma, South Korea has participated in U.S.-led international interventions at several points, including the dispatch of its troops to Iraq in 2003 and to the Strait of Hormuz in 2020.

**THAAD and extended deterrence by the United States**

Once deployed on the Korean peninsula, THAAD can substantially enhance the credibility of U.S. extended deterrence by providing an additional layer of defense for U.S. territories and U.S. forces in East Asia and the western Pacific.
The credibility of extended deterrence is determined by a complex mix of factors, where what counts is the degree of contribution by the client state to the national interest of the patron state. The deployment of THAAD in South Korea provides significant benefits for the United States, such that the former offers strategically important advantages to the latter, including enhanced protection of U.S. territories from North Korean and Chinese ICBMs and containing China’s military expansion in the South and East China Seas amid growing tensions between the two superpowers. Let me discuss these one by one.

To begin with, deploying THAAD in South Korea contributes much to protecting U.S. territories from North Korean ICBMs. According to Seo (2015, pp. 428–430), the largest objective for the THAAD deployment was defense of the contiguous United States from North Korean missile attacks. Deploying THAAD on the Korean peninsula would give the capability to defend the United States against North Korean ICBMs, which are expected to fly either the North or South Pole routes. For instance, the United States can detect and track ICBMs on the North Pole route using THAAD radars stationed in South Korea and counter them with the ground-based interceptor missiles launched from California and Alaska. This system can also detect the ICBMs with THAAD radars in South Korea, track them with THAAD radars located at Shariki Military Base in northern Japan, and intercept them with the missiles launched from Alaska. The United States can detect and track the ICBMs on the South Pole route—the use of which North Korea hinted at when it launched Unha-3 in December 2012—using THAAD radars stationed in South Korea to intercept them with ship-based interceptor missiles launched from Aegis destroyers in the Pacific.

THAAD is also conducive to detecting and tracking China’s ICBMs as they head toward the United States. Two THAAD radars in South Korea can detect and track ICBMs launched in northern China during the booster and ascending phases and allow Aegis destroyers to intercept them during the ascending, midcourse, or terminal phase (Goh, 2015, p. 562). However, it seems far more likely that conflict will develop between China and the United States in the South and East China Seas, particularly regarding Taiwan, than that China might attack the United States with ICBMs. China is gravely concerned that THAAD might neutralize its attempts to block military intervention by the United States during a potential conflict with Taiwan. This means that the presence of THAAD in South Korea is a serious obstacle to China’s ability to secure what it sees as its core interests. China has formalized the precedence of its core interests in its external policy, and it is its policy not to yield or compromise its core interests. While there is disagreement about what constitutes China’s core interests, all prominent Chinese voices agree that the question of Taiwan is central. In fact, the words core interests themselves
were first adopted to signal the significance of Taiwan to China’s foreign policy (Swaine, 2010; Zeng, Xiao, & Breslin, 2015).

China has concentrated its resources on its A2/AD strategy, including reinforcement of its missile capabilities. China’s development and deployment of the Dong-Feng 21D, a land-based carrier-killer missile, indicates the seriousness with which it takes using its military capabilities to counter the U.S. Navy. Beijing argues that its short- and medium-range ballistic missiles are only for defensive purposes, but its tactical doctrine does not exclude preemptive attacks if, for example, Taiwan officially declares its independence. If this option is open, it would follow that China is seeking the capacity to launch a preemptive strike against U.S. forces in the western Pacific with the aim of driving them out of what it calls the first island chain, which stretches from the Japanese Archipelago through Taiwan to the northern Philippines and Borneo (Lim, 2017; Mahnken, 2011). The placement of THAAD on the peninsula provides the United States with a greater capability to detect and track ballistic missiles launched from China in a future cross-strait crisis (Goh, 2015, p. 563).

The Chinese missile units targeting Taiwan, Japan, South Korea, and the United States are concentrated in its northeast region and are within close detection range by THAAD on the peninsula. Beijing is apprehensive in particular about the exposure by U.S. intelligence of its 51st Base in that region through the forward-based mode of THAAD radars on the peninsula. The 51st Base hosts six missile units—the 806th Brigade in Huanglong/Hancheng, the 810th Brigade in Dengshahe, the 816th Brigade in Tonghua, the 822nd Brigade in Laiwu, the U/I Brigade in Fengrun, and the U/I Brigade in Jingyu. Of these, the 806th Brigade, the 810th Brigade, the 822nd Brigade, and possibly the 816th Brigade can launch the Dong-Feng 21D toward the East China Sea and the western Pacific (O’Connor, 2014).

China vehemently opposed the deployment of THAAD in South Korea, stressing that it is not THAAD’s utility, as alleged by the United States and South Korea, but its capabilities and potential, to which it objected. China suspects that THAAD would be a key part of the construction of a missile defense system by the United States against China, located in East Asia. Technically, THAAD is quite capable of shifting its radar from the terminal mode to the forward-based mode, which can cover up to 2,000 kilometres, in four to eight hours simply by changing their operating programs (Lee, 2015, p. 338).

A major concern of the United States today is the rapid development of China’s A2/AD and naval capabilities, which may provide it essential instruments for its maritime hegemony in the Asia-Pacific region. The deployment of THAAD in South Korea may effectively countervail the military modernization of China and consolidate U.S. sea power in the Asia-Pacific region. Furthermore, the United States can launch a preemptive strike against China while effectively neutralizing missiles from China toward U.S. Navy
ships. This, in case of contingencies, would be a forceful measure to contain China (Goh, 2015, p. 565). Steven A. Hildreth, a missile defense specialist at the Congressional Research Service, told the Wall Street Journal that even though “the focus of our rhetoric is North Korea (…) the reality is that we’re also looking longer term at the elephant in the room, which is China” (Entous & Barnes, 2012).

The deployment of THAAD elevates the strategic value of South Korea to the United States amid growing concern over North Korea’s nuclear and missile programs and mounting tensions between the United States and China. In particular, South Korea, due to its geographical proximity to China, can provide a range of key support items for the U.S. rebalancing strategy that cannot be given by other allies and partners. The installation of U.S. missile defense systems, including THAAD, near China to allow it to effectually cope with China’s military modernization would be one of the most important benefits that any ally can provide to the United States. Thus, with THAAD on its territory, South Korea can be more confident in the support of U.S. extended deterrence based upon strategic gains the U.S.-ROK alliance provides vis-à-vis China.

The end of the Cold War diminished the strategic importance of South Korea, and the role of the USFK was largely confined to the protection of South Korea from North Korea’s attacks. The rise of China and the current rivalry between the United States and China has shifted the situation, such that South Korea’s geographical proximity to China has become a great strategic advantage in alliance politics. In that sense, the deployment of THAAD can be interpreted as an opportunity for South Korea to secure extended deterrence by the United States with more assurance. However, this is a double-edged sword for South Korea. An intensification of the rivalry between the two superpowers can lead South Korea to involuntary entrapment in an international conflict. This dilemma will be detailed in the next section.

**U.S. rebalancing strategy and South Korea’s abandonment fear**

The wide gap in military capability between the United States and South Korea and the existence of North Korea have put the relationship between the two democracies on an asymmetrical footing, which required South Korea to adopt behaviors that were consistent with the former’s strategic interest, to a greater or lesser degree. The United States, following its rebalancing strategy, asked South Korea to side with it as it contained China’s military expansion with the deployment of THAAD as arguably the most important task for that ally at that moment (Rinehart et al., 2015, p. 12). In the presence of escalating nuclear threats by North Korea, which heightened the costs of abandonment even further, South Korea decided to deploy THAAD, although
it acknowledged that China would likely retaliate against South Korea for the decision. Seoul, showing a nuanced understanding of the alliance security dilemma, made this strategic choice because it believed that the costs of being abandoned by Washington surpassed those of being entrapped in conflicts with Beijing.

U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s (2011) contribution to *Foreign Policy* under the title of “America’s Pacific Century” amounted to an overt declaration of a shift in U.S. foreign policy, from a Middle Eastern focus to an Asian focus. The core of the United States’ strategic rebalance or pivot to Asia was providing a balance to China’s rapidly growing economic, diplomatic, and most of all, military power. This high-profile policy, however, was not new. According to Silove (2016), the U.S. strategy of reorientation toward Asia has already begun in the mid-2000s, only called a shift toward Asia at that time, not a rebalance or pivot. The means that the Bush administration took of enacting a balance against China included internal and external balancing, implemented by reinforcing its own capabilities and relying on those of its allies. Along these lines, military bases on U.S. soil adjacent to Asia were expanded, such as in Hawaii, Alaska, and Guam; naval assets were reallocated; and innovations were made in military doctrine. Likewise, the military strength of allies and partners was built up, making a model that shifted from the traditional hub-and-spokes model of alliance relationships to a federated network model, building greater interoperability among U.S. allies and partners (Silove, 2016, pp. 67–79). President Obama continued his predecessor’s internal and external balancing in an explicit manner.

The rebalancing strategy was often criticized for lacking substance (Friedberg, 2012; Kolmaš & Kolmašová, 2019; Schake, 2014). However, the Obama administration could point to some palpable achievements, especially in external balancing, as shown in the integration of the missile defense system, based upon enhanced interoperability among the United States, Japan, and South Korea. In the early period of his presidency, President Obama was expected to follow other Democratic presidents and reduce the importance of missile defense, but he increased its importance for national security and extended deterrence instead, partly in a bid to depoliticize an issue that Republicans were keen to utilize against him to allow him to focus more on his domestic agenda (Futter, 2013, pp. 134–158). As a result, supported by both Republicans and Democrats, missile defense “became a normalised part of US national security thinking” during the Obama administration (Burns, 2011, p. 153).

The rebalancing strategy involved a deliberate effort to construct a trilateral alliance network among the United States, Japan, and South Korea. Washington expected that, compared to the traditional hub-and-spoke system of a bilateral alliance, a network structure would diminish defense expenditures by allowing military assets to be integrated with allied assets, providing more
coordinated and thus more effective military operations in contingencies, and contributing to the formation of a U.S.-based security mechanism at the global level in the future (Nam & Lee, 2011). This design took form with the U.S.-ROK Foreign and Defense Ministerial Meeting in June 2012 and the U.S.-Japan Foreign and Defense Ministerial Meeting in October 2013, in which Washington had the threat perceptions of the U.S.-ROK alliance and the U.S.-Japan alliance converged by collectively placing North Korea and China as current and emerging threats (Park & Ju, 2016, pp. 77–78).

The sharing of military information between South Korea and Japan was indispensable in their development of stronger interoperability. In 2012, however, South Korea’s signing of the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) with Japan was aborted at the last minute due to a fierce backlash at home amid friction over historical issues between the two neighboring countries. Washington intervened at that juncture. In March 2014, U.S. President Obama brought South Korean President Park and Japanese Prime Minister Abe together for a trilateral summit meeting in The Hague and successfully put forward the idea of the U.S.-Japan-ROK information sharing as an alternative to the bilateral scheme. In December of the same year, the three countries’ defense chiefs signed the Tri-lateral Information Sharing Arrangement at the U.S.-Japan-ROK Defense Tri-lateral Talks, despite severe resistance from South Korea’s opposition parties and civic groups (Nishino, 2017, pp. 4–6).2

A pivotal role of the trilateral alliance network was to check and counter Chinese military capabilities, and this required the two East Asian allies to enter into a U.S.-led joint integrated missile defense system. Japan joined it as early as in 2006 at the initial stages of external balancing during the Bush administration by installing the THAAD radar at Shariki Military Base in Aomori. In 2014, in accordance with the rebalancing strategy, the Obama administration bolstered its efforts to construct missile defense in East Asia and successfully asked Japan to additionally deploy it at Kyogamisaki Sub Base in Kyoto (Silove, 2016, p. 76).

South Korea can significantly complement the U.S. missile defense system, as the THAAD radars in South Korea provide far more detailed and immediate information of China’s missile activities for the United States than those in Japan. This is because, simply put, the world is round, and radar travels only in a straight line, so geographical proximity to China matters for radar detection and identification of any activities in China. Thus, for example, in a Senate hearing in 2011, General James D. Thurman, President Barack Obama’s nominee as USFK Commander, stated that a THAAD system needed to be deployed on the Korean peninsula to “enhance Ballistic Missile Defense (BMD) early warning in the region” (“Nominations before the,” 2011). In December 2012, the Center for Strategic & International Studies (CSIS) officially suggested to Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta
that, to reinforce missile defense in the rebalancing strategy, the United States should deploy THAAD in South Korea (Berteau & Green, 2012, p. 77). South Korea, however, had been reluctant to join missile defense, expressing concern about the possibility of any negative ramifications for its relations with China. As aforementioned, it had much to lose by participating in the U.S. efforts to counter and check China’s military capabilities.

South Korean President Park Geun-hye had much closer relations with her counterpart in Beijing than her predecessor President Lee Myung-bak had. For example, unlike Japan, South Korea decided to participate in the China-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) in March 2015. Also, the president herself attended the military parade commemorating the end of the Second World War in Beijing in September 2015. This move was interpreted by some analysts at home and abroad as an expression of South Korea’s favorable attitude toward China. The United States was concerned that South Korea’s balanced diplomacy strategy would lead to an equal treatment of the two superpowers or even a tilt toward China (Son, 2017b, p. 133). At that juncture, the 2015 CRS report openly argued that the THAAD issue would be “a litmus test for Seoul’s alignment between Beijing and Washington” (Rinehart et al., 2015, p. 12).

The United States did not officially threaten that it would abandon South Korea—such as by overtly mentioning the withdrawal of the USFK from South Korea, a signal to South Koreans that the United States will abandon them—if the latter did not comply with the former’s request to deploy THAAD. However, before the THAAD decision was made in 2016, a growing number of papers and reports questioned South Korea’s commitment to the U.S.-ROK alliance, as the latter hesitated to install the missile defense system on its territory (Green, Hicks, & Cancian, 2016; Klingner, 2015a, 2015b; Rinehart et al., 2015). For example, a CSIS report publicly brought up the possibility of deliberately weakening the U.S.-ROK alliance by making it subordinate to the U.S.-Japan alliance (Green et al., 2016). Those publications, along with the statements by USFK Commander James D. Thurman and Curtis Scaparrotti on the necessity of the THAAD deployment on the peninsula, formed significant U.S. pressure on South Korea to join its missile defense program in East Asia.

Abandonment by the United States has been a constant fear among South Koreans since the doctrine of the Acheson Line in January 1950, which excluded South Korea from among U.S. defense priorities against communism; this may have in part encouraged North Korea to begin the Korean War. In the early 1970s, after the partial withdrawal of the USFK from South Korea under the Nixon administration, President Park Chung-hee said to Blue House Communications Director Kim Seong-jin that this measure was “a message to the Korean people that we won’t rescue you if North Korea invades again” (Whyte, 2015). This fear of abandonment was
a main driver of the clandestine initiative by the Park administration to develop nuclear weapons (Oberdorfer & Carlin, 2013, pp. 55–59). Under Jimmy Carter, the United States developed a plan to pull all US troops from the Korean peninsula without consulting South Korea, although the plan was ultimately canceled after it met with internal opposition in Washington and, most importantly, Carter lost the 1980 presidential election to Ronald Reagan (Oberdorfer & Carlin, 2013, pp. 68–74). Most recently, in July 2017, President Trump called for the USFK to withdraw from South Korea if it did not pay the expenses of the missile defense system (Rucker & Leonnig, 2020, p. 119).

In 2016, according to then-President Secretary for Defense Affairs Jang Hyeok, the South Korean government decided to deploy THAAD on the peninsula in part to sustain and strengthen the U.S.-ROK alliance, even Seoul was aware that China would retaliate against South Korea in response to the decision. Seoul could not face a weakening of Washington’s commitments to the U.S.-ROK alliance amid escalating North Korean nuclear threats (Author Interview, 2019, December 21). Finding itself between a rock and a hard place, that is, between abandonment and entrapment risks, South Korea opted to risk entrapment in strife with China to evade abandonment by the United States. With a nuclear North Korea in its immediate vicinity, abandonment by the United States is South Korea’s worst nightmare.

During the Cold War, there was little need for South Korea to choose between abandonment and entrapment because, on the one hand, in a bipolar system, the client state could still enjoy the “‘freedom of the irresponsible’—confident that the United States will not withdraw its ultimate protection” (Snyder, 1990, p. 121) and, on the other hand, South Korea heavily depended on American military, political, and economic support. In the post-Cold War era and after the rise of China as an economic superpower, South Korea confronts unprecedented challenges, especially in the middle of an intensifying rivalry between the United States and China. The tension between China and South Korea over the deployment of THAAD is indicative of the diplomatic complexity that South Korea faces today.

Conclusion

Many scholars, journalists, and politicians attributed the 2016 decision to deploy THAAD in South Korea to President Park Geun-hye’s lack of proper consideration of the matter, calling the decision as a diplomatic blunder. However, this article argues that in the context of mounting nuclear threats from North Korea, any South Korean government, whether conservative or liberal, would have eventually decided to deploy THAAD on its territory to enhance the credibility of U.S. extended deterrence and avoid the risk of abandonment by the patron state. For decades, South
Korea’s geopolitical condition, namely, that it shares a border with North Korea, has forced it to depend heavily on the U.S.-ROK alliance for its national security. The choice to deploy THAAD was a calculated one, made reference to a nuclear North Korea in its immediate vicinity. Moreover, the most important strategic considerations for the United States at the global level involve dealing with or balancing China. By strengthening the U.S.-ROK alliance and providing its assistance to the United States to contain China’s military expansion, South Korea can bolster its status as a reliable ally, which is vital for taking the initiative in settling North Korean nuclear issue peacefully.

The Moon Jae-in administration did not rescind the decision to deploy THAAD in South Korea. Rather, this liberal government decided to deploy four additional THAAD system launchers in Seongju immediately after North Korea test-launched an ICBM on July 29, 2017, contradicting President Moon’s previously stated view that the South Korean government should suspend deployment pending a full-scale environmental assessment. In spite of his presidential campaign promises, he pushed ahead with THAAD because he was in agreement with his predecessors that the U.S.-ROK alliance should be prioritized for the security of South Korea. Indeed, the withdrawal of THAAD from the peninsula would be destructive to the alliance. Many politicians and analysts, including Jay Kim, former Member of the U.S. House of Representatives, Cho Won-jin, a South Korean opposition Member of Parliament, and Scott A. Snyder, analyst at the Council on Foreign Relations in the United States, warned that Seoul’s decision to withdraw THAAD from the peninsula could be an excuse for the USFK to withdraw entirely from South Korea (Oh, 2017; Snyder, 2017; Son, 2017a).

The growing tensions between the United States and China can bring harm to many countries’ national interests across the world. Nevertheless, it is rare to find countries, such as South Korea, which would so severely suffer both militarily and economically in the event of discord or conflict between the two superpowers. South Korea can contribute to improving strained relations between them only to a limited extent, but it can still minimize them, at least as regards North Korea’s nuclear weapons and missiles, by pursuing peace on the Korean peninsula in a manner that both sides can agree with. This corresponds with the third method that Snyder (1997, p. 186) suggested that an alliance member can use to successfully cope with the risk of entrapment: to “ease strained relations between the alliance partner and its adversary through proactive diplomatic endeavors.” If ongoing international efforts to put an end to North Korea’s nuclear and missile programs go awry, the tensions between the United States and China could be exacerbated even further. In that case, in response to U.S. demands, South Korea would not be able to avoid risking entrapment again in strife with China because of the nuclear threat that North Korea poses. Then, the degree of retaliation from China
would be more severe than the one it imposed in the wake of South Korea’s decision to deploy THAAD in 2016.

Notes

1. Postol has even argued that the THAAD interceptor itself “is very easily defeated by either causing a missile to tumble end over end, or by intentionally fragmenting a rocket into pieces.” To him, the defense capabilities of the THAAD “can be expected to be very low, probably zero or close to that” (Klug, 2017).
2. In November 2016, about four months after the announcement of the decision to deploy THAAD in South Korea, South Korea and Japan finally signed the GSOMIA (Park & Yun, 2016).
3. Many of those who were involved in the THAAD decision—particularly President Park Geun-hye and Chief of The National Security Office Kim Kwan-jin, the two most important figures—are in prison or on trial.

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