South Koreans Protest US Anti-Missile System THAAD

South Korea was the scene of recent protests against the deployment of the US Army’s anti-ballistic missile system THAAD (Terminal High-Altitude Area Defense) to the country. Close to 1,000 citizens from the Seongju country shaved their heads in protest, with residents concerned that THAAD could potentially emit hazardous radiation, causing cancer and infertility. Residents also fear that the area where the system is deployed will be a target if any future war broke out, in addition to concerns that it may hurt the local watermelon crop.

This is not the first protest against the system, after South Koreans demonstrated just days after the US and South Korea announced that they had reached an agreement in early July. THAAD, which was developed by US military giant Lockheed Martin, has the ability to “intercept and destroy ballistic missiles inside or outside the atmosphere during their final, or terminal, phase of flight.” The system consists of four main components: the launcher, interceptors, radar and fire control, with THAAD’s final battery expected to be installed by late 2017.

The US has cited North Korea as the justification for the move, with a Department of Defence press release from July the 7th stating that: “Based on recent consultations, the United States and South Korea have made an alliance decision to deploy a Terminal High-Altitude Area Defense missile battery to U.S. Forces Korea as a defensive measure to ensure the security of South Korea and that of its people, and to protect alliance military forces from North Korea’s weapons of mass destruction and ballistic missile threats.”

The justification by the US that the system is solely a defensive measure to counter North Korea is clearly false, with THAAD’s major objectives including the monitoring of Russian and Chinese territory, in addition to the protection of the US military presence in South Korea.

In a region where tensions are already running high, the deployment of THAAD has only inflamed them further. Both Beijing and Moscow immediately condemned the move. The Russian Foreign Ministry said in a statement that the deployment of THAAD threatened to “damage the strategic security” of surrounding countries:

"There is concern on both sides [in Russia and China] about the US-South Korean decision to deploy THAAD missiles in the country's south. Such actions by the US and South Korea do not correspond to their stated goals and threaten to deal serious damage to the strategic security of neighboring countries, including China and Russia, and worsen the situation in the country."

Relations between China and South Korea have deteriorated rapidly since the decision was taken to host the system. The Chinese Foreign Ministry has been vocal in their opposition to THAAD, in coordination with Chinese state media. In response to China’s resistance to the move, the office of the South Korean President, Park Geun-hye, released a statement calling Beijing’s criticism “out of place.”

One of the major worries concerning THAAD is the ability it gives the US to monitor activities in parts of Russia and China through the systems radar device (or Army Navy/Transportable Radar Surveillance (AN/TPY-2)). As the Chief
Research Fellow at the Center for Korean Studies of the Institute of Far Eastern Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences, Konstantin Asmolov, wrote in his article for New Eastern Outlook last month:

“The AN/TPY-2 radar used in the THAAD battery can be quickly reconfigured to a mode where it will act as a sensor to detect the launch of ballistic missiles within a radius of up to two thousand kilometers, which allows for a significant part of China and the Russian Far East to be monitored and can be used as a part of a global ABM defense system of the USA. It is no coincidence that besides South Korea, THAAD is also placed on Guam and in Alaska.”

There have also been some questions raised over whether THAAD would even be able to intercept North Korean missiles, as North Korean projectiles reportedly fly at an altitude below the US systems range. As an article published in the Chinese news agency Xinhua argued:

“On a technical note, THAAD is designed to shoot down missiles at a relatively high altitude of 40 to 150 km, but the DPRK’s rockets fly at a lower altitude of about 20 km, so the THAAD system might not be able to intercept them, experts noted.”

Protests in South Korea come only a few months after demonstrations were held across Japan in opposition to US military bases in the country. The protests were largely triggered after a former US Marine, who worked as a civilian worker at a base, allegedly raped and murdered a 20-year-old Japanese women in April.

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