



## How Park Geun-hye's impeachment can heal Seoul's rift with Beijing

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The impeachment of South Korea's President Park Geun-hye may have dragged the country into political chaos, but it may also help to heal a diplomatic rift with Beijing over the planned deployment of a US missile shield.

Analysts say recent overtures from Korean opposition parties' over the Terminal High Altitude Area Defence (THAAD) system — which could delay, if not prevent, its deployment — are being viewed positively by Beijing.

### South Korean opposition lawmakers to visit China over THAAD

Eight lawmakers from the main opposition Democratic Party of Korea (DPK) landed in China this week to meet China's foreign minister, Wang Yi, and other top officials to convey their belief that the decision to deploy THAAD should be left to the next president.

Their visit, which came even as the South Korean defence minister, Han Min-koo, reiterated Seoul's commitment to THAAD, has fuelled speculation that the deployment of the system is not yet a done deal. The DPK's Moon Jae-in, who is the favorite in this year's presidential election, has already suggested rethinking the deployment.

China is concerned that even though a THAAD system on South Korean soil would not be able to intercept Chinese missiles, its X-band radar surveillance system would be able to monitor missile tests on its northern and eastern coasts.

The US claims that in South Korea the system's radars would have a detection range of 600km — far enough to monitor launches from North Korea, but not from China. However, the radars can be configured to have a detection range of 2,000km, putting Chinese launches well within its surveillance arc.

Zhang Tuosheng, director of the Centre for Foreign Policy Studies at the China Foundation for International and Strategic Studies, said Beijing feared Washington's agreement with Seoul was part of a US plan for a regional missile defence network that would grow to encircle China by including Japan, the Philippines, Vietnam and even Taiwan.

Seoul insists it needs THAAD not to target Beijing, but to protect its 50 million population who face a daily nuclear threat from the North.

"The North Korea nuclear threat is like liver cancer to the South. Seoul needs to take drugs because of the cancer, and THAAD is the medicine," a retired senior diplomat told This Week in Asia.

Under current plans, the system would be deployed in May.

Yet the vote by South Korea's parliament to impeach Park over a scandal involving the political influence of her long-term friend Choi Soon-sil may have changed the equation.

On December 22, the Constitutional Court of Korea began a six-month-long hearing to decide whether to accept or reject Park's impeachment. A presidential election, previously scheduled for the end of 2017, could be brought forward if the court upholds the impeachment vote. Even disregarding that vote, Park's prospects look dimmer by the day — already she has been abandoned by 29 of the lawmakers in her ruling Saenuri party, which had previously held 128 of the 300 seats in parliament.

Any successor to Park would be "very likely" to delay the deployment of THAAD, said Zhang.

The DPK's Moon, who lost the last presidential election to Park by 3 percentage points, has already added uncertainty to the THAAD debate by saying the next administration should reconsider the deployment.

How much of that is political maneuvering by Moon is unclear. A diplomat who has spent more than a decade working on the Chinese mainland said even if Moon came to power he would be incapable of stopping the deployment altogether.

"It would be impossible for [Park's successor] to make a complete U-turn on deploying THAAD, but maybe they could slow the process or try to adjust some details to make China happy. The system is [too big a part of] the complicated South Korea-United States security alliance," he said.

That alliance is the legacy of the armistice agreement signed by the US, North Korea and China in 1953 that brought an end to the Korean War and led to the establishment of the 250km long, 4km wide Korean Demilitarised zone that separates the two Koreas.

The South has remained suspicious of Pyongyang's intentions ever since and has often accused Pyongyang of breaking the agreement. In one of the most serious incidents, North Korean forces in 2010 fired about 170 artillery shells at Yeonpyeong Island, killing two civilians and two marines and injuring more than a dozen. Seoul also believes Pyongyang to be behind the sinking earlier that year of its navy corvette, the ROKS Cheonan.

It claims a torpedo fired by a North Korean midget submarine caused the sinking, which resulted in the loss of nearly half the ship's 104 crew.

It also believes the North has dug up to 20 tunnels beneath the heavily fortified border to serve as

invasion routes into the South. Four such tunnels were discovered in the 1970s following the defection of an engineer from the North, while a retired South Korean general in 2014 claimed there may be up to 80.

Given such aggression — not to mention the North's relatively frequent nuclear threats — diplomats in Seoul are exasperated by Beijing's apparent inability to comprehend their fear of the North. They question China's constant lobbying that the two sides should keep up dialogue, even in the aftermath of Pyongyang's two nuclear tests this year.

"We are very disappointed because we thought that China, which shares a common cultural background with us, would understand our problem. On the contrary, the US seems more like it understands our difficulties," said one Sino-Korean scholar in Seoul.

Michael Flynn, a retired US Army lieutenant general designated to serve as Trump's national security adviser, said on December 22 — the same day the Constitutional Court opened its hearing into Park's impeachment — that the deployment of US troops and the planned deployment of THAAD in South Korea were "appropriate" and symbolic of the firm ties between Washington and Seoul.

Hopes that Seoul's relationship with Beijing might improve under Park had initially been bright.

When Park visited Beijing three months after her inauguration in 2013, China's President Xi Jinping described her as "an old friend". And in September 2015 Park, a Chinese culture enthusiast and Putonghua speaker, had the honor of sitting alongside Xi on the podium at Tiananmen Square to review a parade marking the end of the World War II. She was the only head of state of a US ally to be granted the honor.

More recently though, relations had faltered. Beijing was infuriated by the timing of Park's administration in announcing its decision to deploy THAAD. That announcement came on July 13, 2016, just one day after the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague had ruled against China's territorial claims in the South China Sea, a decision Beijing has refused to acknowledge.

"China realizes the importance of the South Korean-American security alliance to Seoul, and sees it as unrealistic to push Seoul to split ties with Washington given the nuclear threat [from the North], but the timing of the THAAD announcement poured oil on the flames of Beijing's anger following its setback over the South China Sea ruling," Zhang said.

Cui Zhiying, a professor of Korean affairs at Tongji University in Shanghai, said both Beijing and Washington hoped the 1953 armistice could be replaced by a new peace mechanism.

"China has always supported restarting talks with North Korea, whether through the Six Party Talks or otherwise, as long as doing so can pave a way to the establishment of a peace mechanism," Cui said.

The Six Party Talks involving China, the US, Russia, Japan and the two Koreas resulted from Pyongyang's withdrawal from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty in 2003. They stalled in

December 2008.

Cui said a stable security environment in Northeast Asia would be possible only when Pyongyang and Washington improved their bilateral ties.

"Now Beijing can only place its hopes on (President-elect) Trump, because his mindset is so different from (incumbent) US President Barack Obama," he said.

The Obama administration had implemented sanctions based on a plan of "strategic patience", but this had not brought a resolution of the nuclear crisis any closer, said Cui. On the contrary, Pyongyang had tested nuclear weapons and missiles at an ever-increasing rate.

Its nuclear tests in January and September this year drew condemnation from the international community. Even Beijing expressed "strong opposition" and suspended coal imports from North Korea for three weeks in December following a new set of UN Security Council sanctions against Pyongyang.

"[The Obama administration's] strategic patience policy has clearly failed, but a harder line policy is not likely to work either," said Ted Galen Carpenter, a senior fellow for defence and foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute.

"Trump is not known for his patience. He will expect, if not demand, greater cooperation from China and Russia to pressure Pyongyang."

Most experts expect Washington will press Seoul to stick to its schedule for deploying THAAD.

On December 21, South Korea's acting president, Prime Minister Hwang Kyo-ahn, called on parliament to support the ruling party in deploying the system as soon as possible to underscore its opposition to the "unprecedented" amount of nuclear and missile tests that took place in 2016.

However, Carpenter said that given the political chaos in South Korea, the Pentagon's wish to keep THAAD on schedule seemed "less and less realistic".

Chung Byung-won, the director-general of the Northeast Asian Affairs Bureau of South Korea, said Seoul would take Beijing's concerns seriously.

"Seoul will not let China suffer any strategic loss because we don't want our relationship to be wrecked (by THAAD)," he said.

"Regarding the anxiousness from China over the X-band radar of THAAD, we suggested setting up a technical meeting and letting experts from the US, China and South Korea sit down and discuss how to reduce our divergence, but we were disappointed as the suggestion was turned down by Beijing."

Both Zhang and Cui felt the issue was a temporary blip as far as bilateral ties between China and South Korea were concerned, saying Beijing would take stock of the new administration and

seek a stable political counterpart to negotiate with.

Zhang said Beijing would not want to isolate South Korea as they shared a common goal — denuclearization of the Korean peninsula.

"So far the most practical measure to ease tension between Beijing and Seoul would be to postpone the deployment of THAAD as long as possible," said Cui. "Time heals all wounds."