

# Moon's Election and the Security of the Korean Peninsula

Issue 2017/01 • May 2017

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On 10 May 2017, Moon Jae-in, a liberal human rights lawyer, was elected as the 12<sup>th</sup> President of the Republic of Korea (ROK). Moon's election puts an end to a period of instability in South Korean politics, unleashed by the political scandal which broke out in Autumn 2016 and led to the impeachment of conservative President Park Geun-hye. Moon has promised dialogue with North Korea and a warmer relationship with China<sup>1</sup>. He has also raised questions about the 'comfort women' agreement reached between South Korea and Japan in 2015, painstakingly negotiated by the Park administration and widely hailed as a stepping stone for greater cooperation between Seoul and Tokyo<sup>2</sup>. Moreover, Moon has criticized his country's excessive dependence on and deference to the United States, and has been especially critical towards the 'hasty' deployment of a new U.S. missile defense system in South Korea: Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD)<sup>3</sup>.

It is simply too early to predict the extent to which Moon's election will lead to significant changes in the ROK's foreign and defense policies. However, the scope for change may be more limited than one might otherwise assume. Instead of extending a much-awaited olive branch, North Korean leader Kim Jong-un "welcomed" President Moon with three missile launch tests. The Democratic People's Republic of Korea's (DPRK) bellicosity casts a shadow over Moon's intended policy of dialogue and engagement. It could also continue to bedevil South Korea's relationship with China, which remains Pyongyang's main international benefactor, albeit with decreasing enthusiasm. In turn, an aggressive North Korea underscores the importance of the U.S. alliance and stronger strategic links with Japan to the security of the ROK.

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President Moon seems to be all too aware of these challenges. Upon taking office, he has warned that when it comes to the DPRK, the carrot of dialogue and engagement must be accompanied by the stick of deterrence – and by an increase in South Korean defense spending<sup>4</sup>. He has also referred to the U.S.-ROK alliance as the cornerstone of South Korea's security, and rec-

ognized the importance of trilateral defense cooperation between the United States, Japan and the ROK. This suggests that Moon's attempts to improve the ROK's ties with China are unlikely to come at the expense of its other vital relationships. Taking these considerations into account, this policy brief outlines some of the challenges that Moon Jae-in is likely to face in relation to four critical and interrelated issues: 1) how to respond to North Korea's nuclear and missile program; 2) how to strengthen South Korean strategic autonomy without damaging the alliance with the United States; 3) strengthening ties with China while preserving other vital relationships; and 4) maintaining security cooperation with Japan.

### **Handling North Korea: Take Out the Carrot, Double Down on the Stick**

President Moon has promised to rekindle some version of the so-called Sunshine Policy, initiated by former president Kim Dae-jung between 1998 and 2003, and continued by President Roh Moo-hyun from 2003 until 2008 – Moon acted as President Roh's chief of staff and was a very close friend of his.

The underlying premise of the Sunshine Policy is that engagement with the DPRK at political and economic levels is the safest path to peace, eventually and ideally followed by unification. A policy of engagement could well contribute to a decrease in tensions between the South and the North, which have been particularly high over the last couple of years. After all, the more confrontational approach, followed by the Park Guen-hye and Lee Myung-Bak administration, has failed to yield significant results, by way of preventing the DPRK from realizing its nuclear ambitions. However, a policy of engagement has its limits, and could in fact be counterproductive at a time when the DPRK continues to make steadfast progress in developing its nuclear and missile capabilities.

To be sure, serious questions remain pertaining to Pyongyang's ability to field long-range missiles and, for that matter, the ability of such missiles to survive the flight between the Korean Peninsula and the Continental United States<sup>5</sup>. The DPRK also needs to master the miniaturization-related technology required to fit a nuclear warhead into an intercontinental ballistic missile. However, it appears that the DPRK is already in a position to reach South Korea, Japan, and even as far as Guam, with nuclear weapons, and that it might be able to reach the

Continental United States by the end of 2017 or early 2018<sup>6</sup>. Against this backdrop, it does not seem prudent to assume that economic incentives, or the promise of a sustained political dialogue, would be sufficient to get the DPRK to turn away from its nuclear and missile program. Pyongyang identifies potential aggression from an external power (in particular the United States) as the main threat to its security. This means that the nuclear and missile program is directly linked to regime survival. From this viewpoint, the reactivation of a Sunshine Policy of sorts in Seoul could buy the DPRK the time and resources to continue to build up its nuclear and missile capabilities.

It would be unfair to dismiss Moon's attitude towards North Korea as simply naïve. In fact, his call for greater defense spending and ROK strategic autonomy suggests that he intends to combine the carrot of dialogue and engagement with a bigger and harder stick. What is particularly noteworthy is Moon's insistence that the ROK should reduce its strategic dependence on the United States, and should be able to deter the DPRK nuclear and missile threat independently<sup>7</sup>. In order to accomplish these goals, Moon expressed his support for a deterrent strategy that revolves around the so-called three axis system:

- *Kill Chain*, a pre-emptive, first-strike strategy aimed at taking out all of North Korea's missile platforms, support systems and relevant military command and control centres;
- *Korea Massive Punishment and Retaliation*, an operational concept designed to annihilate Pyongyang with a missile barrage in the event of a nuclear attack, which would place particular emphasis on eliminating the DPRK's political leaders, especially Kim Jong Un;
- *Korean Air and Missile Defense*. In particular, Moon has expressed his interest in reducing the ROK's dependence on the U.S. in the area of missile defense, especially as it relates to the recent THAAD deployment. Moon is keen on devoting more resources to the development of an indigenous, land-based Ballistic Missile Defense capability, which would revolve around two sets of systems: M-SAM (a medium range surface to air missile) and L-SAM (a long range surface to air missile). In this regard, it is perhaps important to point out that the M-SAM and L-SAM will not be operational until the mid-2020s, and are thus likely seen as a complement of THAAD (rather than an alternative).

## Towards a More Balanced U.S.-ROK Alliance?

To be sure, President Moon has never gone beyond ‘regretting’ THAAD, and has explicitly avoided any mention to the idea of reversing the deployment. It is not even clear to what extent any such reversal would be realistic. THAAD is the introduction of an American system by the U.S. Army – it is U.S. Pacific Command and, more specifically, U.S. Forces Korea that are introducing the system. If the United States wants to introduce changes in the equipment, it needs to perform its security role in Korea; there is no clause in the U.S.-ROK mutual defense treaty that legally obliges it’s consultation to Seoul. Whether it decides to do that – out of deference to the ROK – is a different matter. At any rate, all President Moon has said so far is that the THAAD deployment should be transparent, which means it should go through the National Assembly. In this sense, Donald Trump’s remarks that South Korea would have to pay for THAAD are certainly not helpful, as they could hurt Seoul’s pride and eventually complicate the THAAD deployment.

THAAD-related noise has led to speculation about the potential of Moon’s victory to lead to a weakening of the US-ROK alliance<sup>8</sup>. But this is far from clear. Moon has repeatedly referred to the alliance with the United States as ‘the bedrock’ of South Korea’s security<sup>9</sup>. Moreover, his calls for a greater South Korean defense efforts seem to fit with Trump’s calls for greater burden sharing. Trump believes the United States has borne a disproportionate share of the defense and deterrence burden in East Asia, and has been encouraging his Japanese and South Korean allies to step up, both financially and otherwise. From this viewpoint, Moon’s calls for greater defense spending and strategic autonomy could help strengthen the US-ROK alliance. One of the challenges, however, is to make sure that any attempt on the part of South Korea to be more autonomous when it comes to deterrence does not damage U.S.-ROK interoperability, which is critical in the event of a North Korea-related contingency.

One important issue that relates to U.S.-ROK interoperability is the debate over the transfer of wartime operational control from Combined Forces Command (a U.S.-led Command) to the ROK’s Joint Chiefs of Staff. This is meant to represent a turning point in the U.S.-ROK alliance, illustrating the ROK’s increasing autonomy. This question has been under discussion ever since it was raised by President Roh Moo-hyun back in 2005.

However, the decision has been postponed twice – most recently, President Park delayed the transfer from 1 December 2015 to the mid 2020s, alleging that the increased threat posed by North Korea counselled against transferring wartime operational control away from U.S. Forces Korea<sup>10</sup>. Moon seems intent on speeding up the transfer of operational control, and is expected to begin negotiations next year on the advancement of the transfer date. However, it remains unclear to what extent this would be advisable given the ongoing nuclear and missile threat from the north. If anything, should current efforts to dismantle the DPRK’s nuclear program fail, the ROK and the United States may well have to begin discussing to what extent, and in what ways, U.S. nuclear assets can contribute to deterrence on the Peninsula.

## Getting past THAAD: mending fences with China

The ROK-China relationship has been strained ever since North Korea’s fourth nuclear test in January 2016, and, perhaps more decisively, since the decision to deploy THAAD. China is worried that the radar deployed as part of THAAD could be used by the United States to gather information about its own missile systems and posture. As such, it often portrays THAAD as part of a broader U.S. regional strategy aimed at containing China<sup>11</sup>.

So far, the position of the South Korean government is that the Chinese have been exaggerating the threat posed by THAAD to their own deterrent capabilities. THAAD is a terminal phase system, which in itself makes it impossible to neutralize Chinese strategic missiles. As far as Chinese tactical missiles go, the THAAD radar and its software are geared towards the detection of North Korean missiles. If the U.S. military wanted to re-orient the radar from the north to the west to look at China, the radar would need to be moved to a facility to change the software and the mode. This would take several hours, and would allow China to pick it up, as Beijing’s satellites can sweep the entire Korean Peninsula every two hours. However, China sees THAAD as a test of the strength of the U.S.-ROK alliance, and has tried to use the THAAD episode to drive a wedge between Seoul and Washington.

Over the last few years, the Chinese have been pressuring South Korean politicians and companies to reject THAAD. China responded to the THAAD announcement through various acts of economic retaliation, including an unofficial ban

on Korean cultural products and travel. This has constituted a permanent source of tension between Seoul and Beijing. Moon, who opposed THAAD in the first place, has criticized the previous government's handling of the whole dossier, and has been particularly vocal about the damage THAAD has caused to the bilateral relationship between the ROK and China.

During the campaign, Moon insisted repeatedly that restoring relations with China would be one of his foreign policy priorities. The fact that it was the previous, conservative government in Seoul that was responsible for the introduction of THAAD may allow Moon to distance himself from the whole episode. This might help him repair the diplomatic relationship with Beijing, although it remains unclear whether the Chinese will just accept the idea of THAAD being a *fait accompli* and move on. In any event, China appears to have started lifting some of its "sanctions" in reaction to Moon's election and first weeks in office, in what could serve as an indicator for improving relations between Seoul and Beijing.

Beyond THAAD, and China's economic importance to South Korea, Moon believes (rightly so) that having China fully on board the international community's efforts to resolve the North Korean nuclear issue is crucial. Interestingly, Moon's policy of engagement vis-à-vis with North Korea could make life easier for Beijing. On the one hand, the change of policy in Seoul would make it much harder for the United States to pressure China into pressuring North Korea on its nuclear program. On the other hand, engagement would work in favour of China's efforts to get the U.S. to rule out a military intervention in North Korea.

### **Where next for ROK-Japan security cooperation?**

Over the last few years, Japan and the ROK have taken a number of steps aimed at improving their relationship, both at the political and strategic level. The "comfort women" agreement (reached in December 2015) was seen as a stepping stone in terms of improving the political relationship between the two countries. Nonetheless, issues related to the implementation of the agreement, and changing political tides in Seoul, mean that it is far from locked, and discussions around it are likely to drag on<sup>12</sup>. Another important development was the signature by Japan and Korea of a General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA), which will allow Seoul to draw on Tokyo's intelligence satellites to monitor the northern part of the Korean

Peninsula. GSOMIA is particularly relevant in light of North Korea's evolving nuclear and missile capabilities.

The "comfort women" agreement and GSOMIA have represented stepping stones for greater ROK-Japan security cooperation – and they have also presided over some progress in trilateral defense cooperation between the United States, Japan and the ROK. In particular, the three navies, all of which have ballistic missile defense capabilities, have conducted a number of trilateral BMD exercises. They have engaged in computer-based exercises (no shooting) aimed at testing and finessing their coordination by using the assets needed to neutralize the same missile threat from the DPRK, esp. radars, communications, etc.

Although Moon has raised questions about the "comfort women" agreement, upon arriving in office he has emphasized his commitment to close cooperation with Japan on North Korea, as well as to trilateral U.S.-Japan-ROK defense cooperation. This is understandable, given Japan's importance in the context of a military contingency on the Korean peninsula, not least as a source of strategic depth for the US-ROK alliance

Historically, the U.S.-Japan Alliance has had two roles: countering Soviet expansionism, and providing a logistical and support rear for US forces in the Korean Peninsula. With the Soviet Union long gone, deterring an increasingly powerful China has become the first priority for the U.S.-Japan Alliance. In turn, North Korea's nuclear and missile threat is forcing Washington and Tokyo to adjust their strategy towards the Korean peninsula, by stepping up their bilateral and trilateral (U.S.-Japan-ROK) cooperation in the area of missile defense, and promoting stronger defense links between Japan and the ROK.

### **Conclusions**

The election of Moon Jae-in has led to much speculation about the future of South Korea's foreign and defense policies. Moon's willingness to reach out to North Korea and China means engagement is likely to become a distinguished feature of his foreign policy inventory. However, the reality of North Korea's nuclear and missile program sets clear limits to a possible policy of engagement, casts a shadow over the ROK-China relationship and underscores the ongoing (and even increasing) importance of both Washington and Tokyo to South Korean security.

## Footnotes

- <sup>1</sup> 'South Korea elects Moon Jae-in, Who Backs Talks with the North, as President', *The New York Times*, 9 May 2017.
- <sup>2</sup> 'South Korea's new president questions Japan's 'comfort women' deal', *CNN*, 11 May 2017.
- <sup>3</sup> 'South Korea presidential frontrunner Moon regrets move to deploy THAAD: spokesman', *Reuters*, 25 April 2017.
- <sup>4</sup> 'South Korean President: There's a 'High Possibility' of War With North Korea', *The Atlantic*, 18 May 2017.
- <sup>5</sup> 'Just How Serious are North Korea's Ballistic Missiles', *War on the Rocks*, 1 May 2017.
- <sup>6</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>7</sup> 'Moon seeks to adjust U.S. alliance, reinforce independent defense capability', *Yonhap News Agency*, 10 May 2017.
- <sup>8</sup> See, e.g., Ankit Panda, 'No, South Korea's New President Is Not 'Anti-American'', *The Diplomat*, 10 May 2017.
- <sup>9</sup> 'Moon seeks to adjust U.S. alliance, reinforce independent defense capability', *Yonhap News Agency*, 10 May 2017.
- <sup>10</sup> For an overview see Seoyeon Yoon, 'South Korea's Wartime Operational Control Transfer Debate: From an Organization Perspective,' *Journal of International and Area Studies*, Vol. 22, No. 2 (December 2015), pp. 89-108.
- <sup>11</sup> See Wu Riqiang, 'US Anxiety About Chinese Missile Defense: A Solution,' *Survival*, Vol. 55, No. 5 (2013), pp. 29-52.
- <sup>12</sup> Ankit Panda, 'The 'Final and 'Irreversible' 2015 Japan-South Korea Comfort Women Deal Unravels', *The Diplomat*, 9 January 2017.

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