



The threat to China's security isn't THAAD, it's North Korea

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With [North Korea's Jan. 6 nuclear test](#) and yesterday's [notification of an impending satellite launch](#), long understood to be a cover for testing its long-range ballistic missile technology, Northeast Asia is descending into a familiar pattern of dangerous uncertainty as North Korea initiates another round of destabilizing actions. While [Pyongyang's claims to have tested a hydrogen bomb](#) are likely spurious, the test nevertheless demonstrates the North's continued march toward an advanced nuclear arsenal that makes the North's missile capabilities more destabilizing. In response to this growing threat, South Korea has begun considering requesting US deployment of THAAD (terminal high altitude area defense) to the Korean Peninsula. A week after the North's nuclear test, South Korean President Park Geun-hye [said](#) she "will review the issue of deploying THAAD here based on security and national interests," and this past Monday, ruling Saenuri Party Chairman Kim Moo-sung said, "It is high time for South Korea to have a [forward-looking and aggressive stance](#) about the deployment of a THAAD battery."

While the Chinese Foreign Ministry "[firmly opposed](#)" the North's nuclear test, Beijing has failed to exert its full influence on Pyongyang to change its recent negative behavior – which now includes four nuclear tests, a March 2010 attack on a South Korean naval vessel that killed 46 South Koreans, and the placement of a land mine along the demilitarized zone that maimed two South Koreans in August 2015. Instead, China has given [disproportionate attention](#) to Seoul's consideration of THAAD, including [criticizing Park's statement](#). Beijing's decision to focus on THAAD as a challenge to Chinese security interests, in violation of China's own principle of non-interference, overlooks the serious threats emanating from the Kim regime.

China is uniquely positioned to influence North Korea's strategic decisions, including missile policy, to not only increase security on the Peninsula but also reduce the likelihood of THAAD deployment to South Korea. Since coming to power in 2012, Chinese President Xi Jinping has adjusted China's relations with the North, leading the two allies to distance themselves from each other. Yet China still accounts for the vast majority of the North's trade and investment: it provides food and oil to Pyongyang through a large foreign assistance program; it facilitates most of North Korea's access to the international financial system; and it offers diplomatic support for North Korea in the UN, including watering down sanctions and buffering international pressure to investigate the North's human rights

abuses. China therefore has a unique ability to affect the North's economic stability and internal security, but Beijing's unwillingness to exercise this leverage in the past reduces its practical impact in the eyes of Kim Jong-un, as the young leader knows Xi's threats of stronger action largely ring hollow.

Since 1998, North Korea has conducted five long-range ballistic missile tests and the North has demonstrated significant progress in its ability to strike South Korea and Japan, two US allies. In April 2015, the head of the North American Aerospace Defense Command Adm. Bill Gortney said the United States now believes that the North [is capable of miniaturizing a nuclear weapon](#) to fit on its KN-08 inter-continental ballistic missile, which can reach the continental United States. Combined with 111 shorter range missiles tested in 2014 alone (according to the South Korean government), the North's actions genuinely threaten the South.

Seoul is considering several options in response, including the deployment of THAAD to the Korean Peninsula. In a May 2015 meeting with US military personnel and officials in Seoul, Secretary of State John Kerry said the US government is "talking about THAAD" as part of an effort "[to be prepared for every eventual outcome](#)." On a Jan. 27 visit to Beijing, [Kerry proposed THAAD deployment](#) as one of several responses the United States and China could pursue in light of last month's nuclear test. The administration of President Park has yet to make an official request to the United States, but [recent reports](#) suggest informal talks are advancing rapidly and "[THAAD] is close to a done deal." There are already THAAD radar in Japan and Guam, and coupled with Patriot missiles already deployed to South Korea, THAAD in South Korea would dramatically improve Seoul's anti-missile capability. Another successful North Korean long-range missile test this month may drive Seoul to officially seek THAAD deployment.

Nevertheless, the Chinese government continues to criticize South Korea for considering this option. Chinese officials argue that THAAD could be used to monitor Chinese launches potentially as far inland as Xi'an in northwest China and could be linked to the larger US ballistic missile defense (BMD) system to undermine China's "lean and effective" second strike capability. On January 13, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Hong Lei responded to President Park's comments and explained Beijing's position, [noting](#):

China holds a consistent and clear position on anti-missile issues. It is our belief that every country should keep in mind other countries' security interests and regional peace and stability while pursuing its own security interests. The situation on the Korean Peninsula is highly sensitive. It is hoped that relevant countries can bear in mind the larger picture of regional peace and stability and cautiously and properly deal with the relevant issue.

In response, the US and South Korean governments have repeatedly said that THAAD's capabilities are limited and would only be utilized against North Korea on the Peninsula.

While China's opposition to THAAD is "consistent and clear," so too is its opposition to official dialogue with the United States about missile defense and strategic stability. Obama administration proposals for a high-level dialogue on strategic stability have been rebuffed by China. According to one former senior Obama administration official, such a dialogue could have examined China's concerns about US BMD in East Asia and provided China a better understanding of the specific technical performance characteristics of the THAAD radar and interceptors and of the strategic intentions of the United States and its allies vis-à-vis BMD. This failure to take up the US offer suggests that China is not interested in US reassurances and instead seeks to exploit the issue to try to drive a wedge between the United States and its regional allies. For Seoul, THAAD deployment on the Peninsula is a function of the North Korean threat. China's refusal to engage in Track I dialogue has hampered its ability to participate in the development of a plan that could ease its concerns over BMD.

Moreover, the Chinese government is ignoring the threat posed by North Korea's missile program and its belligerent actions to its own citizens. In March 2014 a [North Korean missile nearly hit a Chinese civilian aircraft](#), leading one former senior Chinese military official to call it "[extremely unfriendly](#)" and "a serious threat" to the plane's safety because the North did not notify China before the launch. The failure of North Korea's April 2012 missile test – which broke up minutes after launch – ended with all three stages falling between China and Korea around the Yellow Sea. During the successful December 2012 tests, the first and second stages landed in the East China Sea and put Chinese fishermen and Chinese military personnel, patrolling the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, in harm's way. North Korea's stated projections for the upcoming [missile test's drop zones](#) largely follow the same path. The North's military has also kidnapped Chinese fishermen in 2012, 2013 and 2014 and its border guards have killed Chinese civilians along their shared border for at least 10 years. The threat to China's security isn't THAAD, it's North Korea.

Nevertheless, Beijing continues to view North Korea as a valuable buffer for China, one that the Xi administration is not willing to abandon for fear of instability on its border. Thus, despite the frustration caused by the North's latest nuclear test, it is probable that Beijing will again refrain from utilizing its full political and economic leverage toward the goal of limiting the North's missile threat. Instead, Beijing will likely return to its traditional policy of supporting the North by limiting the impact of UN sanctions in hopes of maintaining the status quo on the Peninsula, doing little to change Seoul's calculus in THAAD considerations. Seoul should not sacrifice its own security because Beijing feels uncomfortable challenging the Kim regime.

China says it is concerned about THAAD but has failed to demonstrate the sincerity of this concern since it has neither engaged with the United States to better understand THAAD's capabilities nor worked to rein in the North's missile threat to Seoul and others. Until China has exhausted attempts to influence North Korea directly, Beijing should refrain from criticizing South Korea's legitimate defense measures and instead rethink its strategic calculus on the Korean Peninsula.

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