

For South Koreans, THAAD isn't about the United States, China, or even North Korea...it's about Park Geun-hye
by Jenna Gibson

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On June 7, South Korean President Moon Jae-in announced that he was pausing deployment of the Terminal High-Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) missile system in the southeastern city of Seongju until a full environmental review of the system was concluded. At the time, two THAAD launchers were [in place and operational](#) in Korea. Moon's announcement suspended deployment of four more launchers that would complete the system.

This announcement raised red flags in Washington, DC. House Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Ed Royce [called](#) for a quick and thorough review to dispel any concerns about THAAD, and Sen. Dick Durbin expressed deep concern. "I'm troubled by the fact that it is now going to be resubmitted for political debate in the Republic of Korea as to whether or not they will accept our \$923 million investment in missile defense for their country. I can't follow their logic here," [he said](#) during a hearing on June 7.

The questions about what the environmental review means for US-Korea relations under Moon piggyback on other concerns about what it means for Korean relations with China, which has stridently objected to the missile defense system for more than a year. Shortly after the ROK presidential election, the Chinese newspaper *Global Times* [published](#) an op-ed saying "It is likely that Moon will stop THAAD's deployment," and that "Both Beijing and Seoul should take Moon's presidency as an opportunity to promote warmer bilateral relations."

Others see the environmental review as a step toward capitulation to Beijing. Foreign Policy's [report](#) on the announcement was titled, "In Nod to China, South Korea Halts Deployment of THAAD Missile Defense."

But while the US-ROK alliance issue and relations with Beijing are important factors in Korean decision-making, these responses are missing the crucial context of the THAAD deployment. For most Koreans who support the environmental review, THAAD is not about China, or even the United States. It is about scandal-ridden former President Park Geun-hye, whose approval rating [dropped](#) to a rock bottom 4 percent before her impeachment. For most Koreans, with the exception of a hardcore group on the far left who will take any excuse to hold an anti-American demonstration, the problem isn't THAAD itself, but the fact that it was initiated by President Park that is the cause for concern.

Although THAAD has been discussed since 2014 and the agreement to move the system onto the Korean Peninsula was made last spring, opponents have accused the outgoing Park administration of rushing through the final stages of deployment for the initial two launchers in an attempt to block the new president from reversing the decision.

Further complicating the issue is that just a few weeks after his inauguration Moon discovered that the additional four launchers were on their way – and his Defense Ministry [purposely failed](#) to inform him.

These procedural issues – along with the fact that a full environmental review of the deployment area was not conducted – has raised concerns among the Korean public. [According to](#) the Asan Institute for Policy Studies, the turning point occurred in July 2016 when the Park administration "moved quickly to select the site that would host the THAAD batteries," saying that "the lack of transparency in the decision-making process by the Park administration turned THAAD into a major domestic political issue." According to Asan's polling, approval of the system plummeted from a high of 73.9 percent in January 2016 (following North Korea's fourth nuclear test) to just 53.6 percent after Park's announcement.

Multiple surveys have shown that objections about THAAD are as much about the process as about the system itself. A February 2017 [poll](#) showed that 37.5 percent of respondents wanted the next government to "review any mistakes" made in the deployment, while 17.9 percent said that despite mistakes made, the next government should go forward with the plan (the remaining 34 percent were supportive without qualifications). A few months later, in a [poll](#) conducted just before the May 9 presidential election, 36.8 percent of respondents said THAAD should be deployed, but not rushed. An additional 28.4 percent said sudden deployment was the right move, and 28.9 percent said the new administration should reconsider the system altogether.

Adding further credence to the idea that it is tied to the Park administration that are causing domestic unease about THAAD, President Moon has not been shy about reviewing many of the major decisions made by his predecessor. In his first month as president, he announced reviews of several major Park policies, including state-sponsored textbooks and the landmark Comfort Women Agreement with Japan.

The president has tried to explain how domestic politics and questions about process are impeding his ability to move forward on THAAD, and he has insisted on several occasions that the environmental review is not a reversal of deployment plans. During [Senator Durbin's](#) recent visit to Seoul, Moon told him, "My order for a probe on THAAD is purely a domestic measure and I want to be clear that it is not about trying to change the existing decision or sending a message to

the United States.” Later, [while meeting](#) with House leadership in Washington, Moon said, “Demand for democracy is particularly high because of the candlelight revolution, and demand for democratic procedural legitimacy for the THAAD deployment is, therefore, high.”

This has not quelled concerns among those in Washington who want a swift and full deployment of the system, however. “They have put, I think, our troops at risk,” said Rep. Steve Chabot during a Foreign Affairs Committee hearing on June 28. “It would seem to me that we ought to give South Korea a choice – they have the choice of having the most sophisticated missile defense system, the THAAD system to defend them and to defend our troops. So they get the missile system and our troops or they have no missile defense and no US troops. I think it ought to be a very clear choice to them and they need to face that choice head on.”

Moon’s biggest problem both from his domestic constituency and his foreign counterparts is that the facts of the case are less important than the public’s interpretation of them. For the Korean public, the lack of transparency and irresponsibility of the previous administration, coupled with suspicions about the THAAD process, mean no explanation will convince everyone that all boxes were checked before deployment. And for US policymakers, no speeches about constraints from domestic public opinion change the perception that this is a slight against the US-Korea alliance.

As former Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich said during a CNN interview during the 2016 presidential campaign, “As a political candidate I’ll go with how people feel, and I’ll let you go with the theoreticians,” arguing that how people feel about an issue is more important than what the facts may say. In other words, President Moon has his work cut out for him if he wants to change how two very different groups of people feel about THAAD.

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