

## **China's alliance blindspot** by Brad Glosserman

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Chinese strategists and defense planners are extremely unhappy about the planned deployment of the Terminal High Altitude Aerial Defense (THAAD) missile defense system in South Korea. Their objections reflect (misguided) national security concerns, a rejection of alliances generally, and a more fundamental inability to understand alliance dynamics. The controversy surrounding the THAAD deployment offers important insight into how China understands regional dynamics and the message is troubling: efforts to address Chinese complaints from a security perspective — that which drives alliance decision making — will fail.

Chinese officials and experts have rejected THAAD deployment since it was first mooted, arguing that it will undermine strategic stability in Northeast Asia and reduce security for all nations in this region. China's Foreign Ministry responded to the deployment announcement last week with excoriating language, saying THAAD "will in no way help achieve the goal of denuclearization on the Peninsula and maintain peace and stability of the Peninsula. It runs counter to the efforts by all parties to resolve the issue through dialogue and consultation and will gravely sabotage the strategic security interests of regional countries including China and regional strategic balance." Chinese complain that THAAD risks triggering an arms race or undermining China's deterrent by giving the US important data on Chinese missile launches, that it will lead to a deterioration of relations between China and South Korea, and that it will harden sentiment in Beijing and Moscow against Washington (and Seoul), making it more difficult to cooperate on other issues.

Chinese objections reflect four distinct considerations: opposition to alliances generally, national security concerns, tactical concerns, and a fundamental inability to grasp (or acknowledge) alliance dynamics.

First, Chinese insist that alliances are Cold War relics, products of an outdated security paradigm in which some nations pursue security at the expense of others. Alliances create rivalries between member and nonmember states. Countries that aren't part of an alliance are potential targets of its military capabilities. This zero-sum approach to security should be replaced, counter the Chinese, with inclusive, plus-sum thinking that forces all nations to work together for security for all, rather than just for some.

Second, prevailing opinion holds that THAAD is a thinly veiled attempt by the United States to degrade China's nuclear deterrent and claim "absolute security" at China's expense. The Foreign Ministry announcement cited above charges that it will sabotage China's strategic security interests

since THAAD radars provide coverage of Chinese missile launches, allowing the US to target them and neutralize its deterrent. Chinese also point out that THAAD does not protect all of South Korea from DPRK missiles nor does it protect against artillery that hold Seoul hostage. These gaps lead Chinese officials and analysts to believe that the real target — if not today, then tomorrow when US capabilities improve — is China, not North Korea.

Virtually every US expert counters that THAAD offers little transparency into China, and the information it does provide is marginal at best. They concede that THAAD doesn't address all DPRK threats, but it does protect against some and in so doing it complicates Pyongyang's calculus. Every US policy statement explains that missile defense systems are aimed at rogue states and there is no intention (nor capability) of using them against better armed adversaries (read Russia and China). Efforts to make this case have been stymied by the Chinese government's refusal to receive an official briefing on THAAD.

Third, there is a tactical element to Chinese objections. They ensure that Seoul (and other governments) know that there are real consequences to ignoring Chinese preferences in such matters; reportedly, high-level — ministerial and vice ministerial — defense talks between South Korea and China have been shelved as a result of Chinese anger. Even if this particular move cannot be blocked, China has put down a marker for future national security decisions in Seoul and other regional capitals. That marker may have considerable value in South Korea's 2017 presidential elections, and Beijing will ensure that all political parties and the public recognize that THAAD undermines the two countries' relationship.

There is another tactical consideration in the Chinese position: a focus on THAAD obscures the Korean complaint about China's failed diplomacy toward Pyongyang. In other words, arguing about THAAD distracts from the charge that Beijing was unable (or reluctant) to eliminate the factors that pushed Seoul to deploy the weapons system. The Park Geun-hye government courted China for years — taking considerable criticism for doing so from some in Washington and many in Tokyo — in the hope that Beijing would use its leverage to moderate North Korean behavior. Only after it became clear that those hopes were empty did Seoul make the decision to go with THAAD.

Finally, there are fundamental problems in how China thinks about alliance relationships and these blindspots prevent Beijing from understanding decision making in Seoul. Most fundamentally, Chinese show little appreciation for an ally's autonomy. They refuse to believe that the South Korean government could make a decision on its own that would flout Chinese preferences. Instead, the prevailing sentiment is that

allies are US puppets, with Washington making all decisions of import.

This blindspot could reflect China's limited experience with alliances, although the history it has had — with the Soviet Union during the early days of the Cold War and with North Korea — should have disabused Chinese of any belief that the “senior” ally calls all the shots. More likely, Chinese thinking stems from two other beliefs: that “there are big countries and small countries” and the former's concerns take precedence over those of the latter (as Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi pointedly stated at the July 2010 ARF meeting), and that the US is a hegemon, and by definition such countries can force allies to do as they wish.

In fact, South Korea has opted to deploy THAAD because it feels threatened. As Yoo Jeh-seung, head of the Defense Policy Office of the ROK Ministry of Defense explained, THAAD is a “defensive measure “ to “protect alliance military forces from North Korea's weapons of mass destruction and ballistic missile threats.” He also noted that it will be “focused solely on North Korean nuclear and missile threats and would not be directed toward any third party.”

Insecurity drives ROK decision making, not a heavy US hand or some secret plan to undermine China's strategic systems. Until China recognizes that fact, it will be unhappy with regional developments and the Northeast Asian security environment will continue to deteriorate.

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