

Moon Jae-In’s THAAD Conundrum: South Korea’s “candlelight president” faces strong citizen opposition on missile defense

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September 7, 2017, in Soseongri, South Korea. Photo by Park Jung-yeop of Newsmin. Used with permission.

Apocalyptic panic and glib memes frame much of American discourse about the current North Korean nuclear crisis. Yet the North Korean crisis poses a challenge to the mandate of South Korea’s new liberal president, Moon Jae-in, to usher in an era of truly democratic politics, and indeed, to the fate of his administration. On the critical issue of US plans to install a terminal high area altitude defense (THAAD) system, an issue that has roiled the waters among South Korea, the United States and China, Moon has chosen to leave intact former conservative president Park Geun-hye administration’s undemocratic legacy.

THAAD is a controversial US-operated technology designed to intercept ballistic missiles in their terminal phase. One THAAD battery is comprised of six truck-mounted launchers and a powerful radar system. Following a 2016 bilateral agreement to deploy one THAAD battery in South Korea, in April 2017 the US delivered two launchers and the radar system to a golf course-turned-US installation near the remote village of Soseongri. As a presidential candidate, Moon had criticized the undemocratic and opaque decision-making processes of the original THAAD agreement, as well as the partial THAAD deployment in April. He also called for increased dialogue with North Korea.

Shortly after assuming the presidency, however, following a July 28 North Korean intercontinental ballistic missile test, Moon began calling for a tougher stance toward North Korea. He held an emergency meeting with the National Security Council and, in a reversal of his position on THAAD, announced that he would agree to allow the US to deploy the four remaining launchers to complete the THAAD battery. This decision touched off a fierce sixteen hour confrontation on September 6 and 7 between 8,000 police and 600 protesters in Soseongri as his administration cleared the way for US delivery of the launchers and other equipment.



A portion of the emergency roadblock set up by protesters early on the evening of September 6, 2017. Unless otherwise noted, all photos are by the author.

Moon has claimed that the deployment of the four launchers is only temporary. However, given US insistence on the deployment, and in light of the tense militarized situation on the Korean peninsula, “temporary” could turn out to be a very long time. Earlier in his term Moon said that he was “shocked” to learn that four more THAAD launchers—the very ones he would later allow to be deployed—had been brought into South Korea from the US. They had arrived secretly without his knowledge. Moon was so dismayed that he ordered a probe into the issue.¹

Moon’s late June summit with Donald Trump, which occurred within the context of increasing tensions with North Korea, set the stage for his THAAD reversal. As Tim Beal has argued, Moon displayed a servile attitude at the summit, easily yielding to US demands and avoiding discussion of the THAAD issue altogether in order to ensure a smooth meeting. He squandered his momentum as a popular new

president and effectively established a dynamic in which South Korean international affairs would be subsumed within the US-South Korea alliance.² This dynamic, and the THAAD deployment in particular, severely limits the possibility of dialogue with North Korea and strains South Korea’s relationship with China.

Moon’s reluctance to reverse Park’s THAAD decision, and his failure to assert South Korean interests in his summit with Trump, have been heavily criticized by anti-THAAD activists. Although the US does not advertise its intention to encircle China, THAAD’s technical specifications suggest that the primary US interest in deploying THAAD is to deprive China of a second-strike capability in a nuclear war, and to increase US monitoring capabilities in the region.³ In a comparable moment during the Roh Moo-hyun administration, activists pointed out that South Korea was stuck with much of the bill for the spatial reorganization of US bases in South Korea. Base reorganization is part of the US pursuit of “strategic flexibility”, a euphemism for a more regional approach to security in which the US uses South Korea as one of many bases to achieve broader objectives.

The Chinese government has openly expressed dissatisfaction and anger at South Korea’s increasingly obvious role as a base for broader regional US objectives as illustrated by the Moon regime’s decision to accept the deployment of THAAD. China responded to South Korea’s decision to deploy THAAD by banning package tours to South Korea in the spring of 2017, with devastating effect on the tourist industry in places such as Jeju Island. It also retaliated against the Lotte Group, which turned over a golf course near Soseongri to the US to be used as a THAAD deployment site. The Chinese government closed down seventy-four of 99 Lotte stores in China for “fire violations” and encouraged citizen boycotts of Lotte and other South Korean companies.⁴ In the first half of 2017 alone, South Korean

companies lost an estimated \$4.3 billion as a direct result of conflict with China over THAAD.⁵ While this economic loss is not driving the activism at the center of the anti-THAAD movement, the tangible effects of a degraded relationship with China signal that THAAD is much more than a fringe theme in South Korea, whose largest trade partner is China.

Given North Korea's ongoing missile testing and its threats against both the US and South Korea, common sense might seem to dictate that South Korean citizens would welcome THAAD as a defensive technology providing US protection against North Korean attack. Indeed, proponents of the system insist that it is the best defense available to protect South Korea from the North. Two successful THAAD tests in the Pacific this summer strengthened this confidence.⁶

Yet prominent experts such as MIT weapons physicist Theodore Postol claim that the system will not work to defend South Korea from North Korea. Not only is the capital city of Seoul, located just thirty miles from the North Korean border, excluded from THAAD's defense area, but North Korea could also easily trick interceptors by using decoys.⁷ Additionally, the system is only capable of intercepting high altitude missiles, which North Korea would be unlikely to use against its immediate neighbor. Former US defense secretary William Perry also commented on the system in June: "The US probably gave South Koreans a positive impression about THAAD's defensive capabilities. But objectively speaking, THAAD probably wouldn't be that good at defending against a North Korean missile attack".⁸

At the heart of the anti-THAAD movement is the recognition that the South Korean government has handled the THAAD deployment in an illegal and undemocratic way while yielding to US demands rather than protecting the safety of the South Korean people. The agreement to deploy THAAD was

reached between the Park Obama administrations in 2016 after years of US pressure on South Korea.⁹ Park's decision came under fire from South Korean citizen groups in part because the national assembly was not consulted on the matter before the agreement was finalized, and no public documents were released that would provide detailed information about either the decision making process or the terms of the agreement. Lack of transparency around the agreement raises red flags given that Park and some of her closest associates are now serving prison sentences for various corruption-related crimes committed during her time in office. Activists generally believe that the US pressured South Korea to agree to the deployment as part of its broader regional objective, the encirclement of China. They also see the agreement as part of a corrupt weapons deal with Lockheed Martin, which manufactures the THAAD system. It is not an outlandish conspiracy theory given that state prosecutors recently initiated an investigation into the Park administration's multi-billion dollar 2014 acquisition of Lockheed Martin F-35 stealth fighters.¹⁰

In July of 2016, the South Korean government announced that Seongju County (which also contains Seongju City as well as the village of Soseongri) would be the THAAD deployment site. Prime Minister Hwang Kyo-ahn traveled to Seongju to persuade residents to accept the decision, but was met with insults and a barrage of raw eggs and plastic water bottles. Standing in front of the county office covered in yolk and egg whites, and shielded by bodyguards who continued to fend off flying objects, his case fell on deaf ears.¹¹

The anti-THAAD movement was at first joined by Kim Hang-kohn, the Seongju County chief who, like Park Geun-hye, was a conservative party member of the now-defunct *saenuri dang*. He rallied thousands of local citizens to oppose the decision to install THAAD. However, in August 2016 the central government switched

the THAAD deployment site from a hill near Seongju City to a new location in Seongju County, the Lotte golf course near Soseongri. Kim then suddenly reversed his stance and took a pro-THAAD position. Kim's reversal sapped the local movement of much of its popular local appeal. Local activists brand it as a great betrayal of his constituency in the service of party loyalty and personal careerism.¹²

When the anti-THAAD movement began gaining strength in mid-2016, it was in sync with the broader political transition throughout the country and provided momentum to it. A corruption scandal exploded in the autumn of 2016, leading to the popular "candlelight revolution" and the subsequent impeachment and imprisonment of former president Park Geun-hye.¹³ Media investigations revealed that Park's long time confidant, Choi Soon-shil, used her proximity to the president to extort massive amounts of money from various firms and to wield undue influence in Park's administration in spite of the fact that she held no official position. By December, Park was impeached, and in 2017 both she and Choi would be convicted of corruption-related crimes and sentenced to years in prison.

After Park's impeachment, an interim government led by prime minister Hwang Gyo-ahn—the very person who had tried to persuade Seongju residents to accept THAAD and ended up covered with raw eggs—assumed power. Under pressure from the US and worried about the imminent prospect of Moon winning the May election, Hwang approved the rushed partial deployment of THAAD, presenting any new government with a fait accompli. His decision not only reflects US pressure but also the deeply entrenched conservatism and pro-US attitudes of those within the Ministry of National Defense and the South Korean civil service. Under the original agreement between the Park and Obama administrations, the system would not be deployed until the end of 2017. Yet on the

morning of April 26, on the watch of the interim government, a US military convoy of 20 vehicles arrived at Soseongri. Stunned villagers, who by all accounts unanimously oppose THAAD, attempted to block the convoy only to be vastly outmatched by police. At the time, Moon, who was leading in the presidential race, criticized the rushed nature of the partial deployment and the lack of transparency surrounding the initial agreement with the US.¹⁴

Since the April deployment, police have maintained a full-time presence in Soseongri. Moreover, right-wing protesters from a reincarnated Northwest Youth League—the paramilitary group that participated in the brutal suppression of the Jeju Uprising in 1948—regularly march through the village, waving American flags, blaring anti-communist rap, and verbally harassing locals through a megaphone.¹⁵ Anti-THAAD activists from around the country, calling themselves "protectors", take shifts in the village, watching out for the arrival of US military equipment as well as for the Northwest Youth League. Religious groups opposing THAAD deployment have maintained a, twenty-four hour prayer presence in the village. Residents in nearby Seongju City and Gimcheon have held nightly candlelight protests for over a year.



The Northwest Youth League in Soseongri, with anti-communist rap blaring in the background, on July 13, 2017. The group attempted to march through Soseongri, but was stopped by a villager sit-in on the main village road. Mocking an anti-THAAD slogan, the red sign reads, “If THAAD goes then peace will come? A commie lie! The truth??? If THAAD goes then war will come!”

Early in his term Moon ordered a full environmental assessment of the THAAD deployment site, ostensibly barring movement on the issue for a period of a year or more.¹⁶ Meanwhile activists stressed the undemocratic and corrupt government practices that had led to THAAD deployment. Prior to Moon’s reversal on THAAD in late July, activists held to the idea that once the corruption of Park’s government was fully uncovered, the new administration would have no choice but to reverse the THAAD decision.

The situation came to a head on September 6 when the Moon administration sent 8,000 riot police to Soseongri, 200 km south of Seoul, to clear the way for a US military convoy

transporting four launchers and other equipment. In a sixteen hour struggle that lasted from late afternoon into the next morning, police encircled the village and eventually broke through a blockade of over 60 parked vehicles and 600 protesters. They ripped through protest tents and leapt on top of cars to break the blockade, forcing protesters to make way for the US convoy.

Ever since farmer Baek Nam-gi sustained fatal injuries during a 2015 protest under the Park government, South Korean police have been under public pressure to refrain from using excessive force against protesters. However, at Soseongri on September 6 and 7, police surged into crowds and nearly trampled fallen protesters. At one point a car almost tipped over on top of a group of people. In total, 38 injuries were reported, including those of six police officers.

Given just a few hours notice of the deployment, anti-THAAD activists from around the country poured into the village throughout the night, traveling on back roads and weaving through rice fields in order to evade the heavy police presence. Some elderly residents watched in tears as the scene unfolded; others hurled melons and sticks, or threw their own bodies into the crowd to push back against the police. By mid-morning, the US convoy transporting the four launchers and other equipment had passed through Soseongri.



Police climb over cars, and protesters attempt to hold them back (left). A Won Buddhist reverend watches police and protesters struggle from inside a modified container hut used by clergy. This photo was taken through the window (right).

Protesters attempt to keep police from ripping through tents that had been permanently set up in order to house activists. Photo by Park Jung-yeop of [Newsmin](#). Used with permission (left). Villagers watch as police break the roadblock and permeate village space (right).

While the anti-THAAD movement is largely driven by residents of Seongju County and the surrounding area, it is supported by networks

of activists from all over the country, many affiliated with religious, peace, labor, and social justice organizations that can mobilize their memberships for important events such as the emergency blockade of September 6 and 7.

Particularly influential are the Won Buddhists, whose main pilgrimage site is in Soseongri. For several months, clergy from all over the country have been on continual rotation to Soseongri, maintaining a prayer presence, scuffling with police, and using religious pretexts to set up blockades. Won Buddhist clergy as well as Catholic clergy involved in the struggle have sharply opposed the police and other representatives of the state. Two minor incidents illustrate this. In July, in a reconciliation meeting after a particularly difficult confrontation with Seongju police, a local Won Buddhist reverend told the local police chief that he was acting no differently from police under Japanese colonialism—essentially calling him a colonial collaborator. On September 6 in Soseongri, a local Catholic priest suddenly broke the somber sermon he was delivering from the back of a blockade truck as police gathered alongside the road. Jumping off the bed of the truck and lunging toward the police line, he shouted that they were “sons of bitches” (*gaesaekhideul*). Fellow protesters had to hold back the priest. Such incidents are regular occurrences in the struggle.



A Won Buddhists reverend approaches the prayer tent on the main road in Soseongri (left). At a July 26, 2017, protest, a Seongju County resident smashes a mock THAAD launcher. In this moment, he is shouting “Korea is not a colony of the US!”. The event was also attended by a US peace delegation that included high-profile activists (right).

A few activists living in the communities near the deployment site were involved in labor and

other progressive movements prior to becoming involved with the anti-THAAD struggle. Many others, however, had never before participated in a political movement, and describe participation in the struggle as a radicalizing experience.

When the THAAD deployment was announced in 2016, locals were initially concerned about health and environmental impacts of the missile defense system, and they were also worried about the locality becoming a target of attack. But this quickly broadened and deepened into a critique of the way in which the US-South Korea relationship subverted South Korean democracy. As evidenced by their discussion of the movement at daily protests, they distrust both the state, which engages in a “one-way conversation” on behalf of the US, and the mainstream media, which “distorts” their cause on the national stage. The political transitions of many are extraordinary given that they are largely first-time activists living in an overwhelmingly conservative part of the country.

On the morning of September 7, in the wake of confrontation between police and protesters, wrecked tents, ripped up mats and banners, and trash were strewn across the main street of Soseongri. Sleep-deprived activists gathered stray watches, single shoes, smashed glasses, and other personal items into a pile in front of the village hall. Several policemen, mostly young conscripts, returned to retrieve lost belongings only to be shooed away by villagers. Villagers on the scene in Soseongri on September 6 and 7 referred to the whole experience as “the second trauma”, the first being April 26.



A reporter sets up for a broadcast in the aftermath of the September 6 -7 struggle. The main street of the village is covered in debris (left). Police file out of Soseongri at noon on September 7, 2017 (right).

Regrouped, but still surrounded by police two hours after the US convoy passed through Soseongri, residents and supporters held a press conference to announce that the anti-THAAD struggle would continue. One Won Buddhist leader stated, “From now on, we can

no longer say that the THAAD deployment is simply an evil of the previous government. It is instead a new and illegal action of the Moon Jae-in government.”

Indeed, Soseongri’s “second trauma” did not happen on the watch of a corrupt right-wing government run by the daughter of a dictator, nor by an interim government with zero legitimacy. It happened on the watch of the “candlelight president” himself.

Two days after the THAAD deployment, people who participated in the incident as protesters began to complain that any time they saw a truck, they would become anxious and

imagined it was a THAAD launcher. Meanwhile, Moon went on a well-photographed hiking trip with his dog, appearing relaxed. The Blue House reported—perhaps a bit prematurely—that there was no sign of retaliation from the north, and again reiterated its insistence that the THAAD deployment was for the benefit of the people.

Related articles

- Tim Beal, [A Korean Tragedy](#)
- Nan Kim, [Candlelight and the Yellow Ribbon: Catalyzing Re-Democratization in South Korea](#)

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Notes

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¹² Park, Jung-yeop, “[Gimhanggon Gunsu Jesambuji Suyongtgyeongchal Dongwonhae Seongjugunmin Baesin](#)” [“County Chief Kim Hang-gun’s Acquiescence on the Third Deployment Site: Police Mobilize, Seongju Citizens Betrayed], *News Min*, 22 August, 2016

¹³ Kim, Nan, “[Candlelight and the Yellow Ribbon: Catalyzing Re-Democratization in South Korea](#)” *The Asia-Pacific Journal*.

¹⁴ “[South Korean President Frontrunner Moon Regrets Move to Deploy THAAD: Spokesman](#)”, Reuters, 26 April, 2017.

¹⁵ Ryang, Sonia, “[Reading Volcano Island: In the Sixty-fifth Year of the Jeju 4.3 Uprising,](#)” *The Asia-Pacific Journal*,

¹⁶ The interim government circumvented a full environmental assessment by dividing up the deployment site into several smaller sections, which would taken separately require only minimal environmental assessment prior to THAAD deployment. See Park, Byong-su, “[THAAD Deployment Could Slow Down as Pres. Moon Orders Environmental Assessment](#)”, *The Hankyoreh*, 6 June, 2017.