

## ***Changing Security Dynamics in East Asia and its Impacts on South Korea's Middle Power Diplomacy***

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### **Abstract**

China's economic and military rise in recent decades has begun to change East Asian regional security order, dominated by the US since the end of World War II, based on hub-and-spoke security architecture. Not only is China increasingly aggressive over its maritime territorial disputes in East China and South China seas, but also aspires a 'new type of great power relationship' with the US, whose ultimate objective is to create China-centered Asia, largely devoid of US influence and accepted by the US. Following the launch of 'Pivot (later Rebalancing) to Asia' by Obama administration in the face of assertive China, the region has experienced the 'return of geopolitics'. The burgeoning US-China rivalries and Japan's new assertiveness at the regional level in recent years started to impair South Korea's middle power diplomacy which had been earnestly pursued globally since the beginning of Lee Myung-bak administration (2008-2013). North Korea's military provocations manifested in the Cheonan naval ship sinking, Yeonpyeong Island shelling and its nuclear tests, and China's diplomatic shielding of these reckless added to South Korea's 'strategic ambiguity'. This article attempts to explore how this changing security dynamics in the region impacts South Korea's middle power diplomacy.

**Keywords:** East Asian security, US-China rivalry, South Korea's middle power diplomacy

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## **I. Introduction**

The hub-and-spoke architecture based on US bilateral security ties with Japan, South Korea and Taiwan has been the main provider of peace and stability in East Asia<sup>1</sup> since the end of World War II. China's rapid economic and military rise since its economic reforms in 1978 has begun to undermine American primacy in the region and the broader Asian order in the recent past. China's dependent on maritime trade for the first time in its history since 1990s has been driving the expansion of its military power in South China Sea. Japan, South Korea and other East Asian countries too developed military modernisation due to the security threat arising from within and outside of their territories. The 25 years of the post-Cold War period have witnessed the evolution of inter-spokes security relations which has been steadily enhanced through a number of trilateral initiatives.

China's diplomacy has moved towards more confident and assertive in international politics in the wake of the 2008 global financial crisis. This is evident from its angry reaction over US arms sales to Taiwan in January 2010 and over the Dalai Lama's visit in February 2010; its apparently more expansive claims over the South China Sea in March 2010; its diplomatic defence of violent actions by the North Korea on Cheonan sinking in March and Yeonpyeong Island shelling in November 2010; and its tough response to the Japanese arrest of a Chinese fishing captain in September 2010 (Johnston, 2013). Compared to its verbal critique in the past, China vociferously protested the US-Korea joint naval exercise in the Yellow Sea in July 2010, which compelled them to shift their maneuvers to the Sea of Japan. At the Fourth Conference and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA) summit held in Shanghai on May 21, 2014, Chinese President Xi Jinping even proposed a 'New Asian Security Concept' that excludes US in the region.

Stressing the significance of the Asia-Pacific, President Obama launched its 'Pivot to Asia' in 2011 with its main emphasis on strengthening military ties with its Asian alliance, a shift in US foreign policy priority after two decades of war in Afghanistan and Iraq. Under this strategy, the US strives to strengthen security ties with its Asian Alliance and make full use of the region's economic potential while preventing China from shaping East Asia according to its own terms and rules. This had been greatly emphasised during Hillary Clinton's first official visit to Asia in 2009 followed by Obama's attending of the Sixth East Asia Summit for the first time in Bali, Indonesia on November 18–19, 2011. On his last stop in Australia before attending the meeting, Obama declared that America was 'here to stay' as a Pacific power. Beijing disapproved of this strategy and accused the US of containing China. As a result, the Obama administration adjusted this strategy and renamed it as 'rebalancing to Asia' in the late 2012 from military initiatives to economic and diplomatic elements and called for deeper engagement with China..

The US launch of its Pivot to Asia in the face of assertive China has impaired South Korea's middle power diplomacy at the regional level, which had been carried out successfully at the global level since the inauguration of the Lee Myung-bak administration in 2008. The US-China geopolitical rivalry in the region has put South

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<sup>1</sup> East Asia here refers to China, Japan, North Korea, South Korea, Mongolia and Taiwan, although the term has also been used in geopolitical sense to include the 18 members of East Asia Summit together with North Korea.

Korea into a strategic ambiguity offering limited options for its foreign policy strategy. The North Korea military provocations and the divergent response from China and US posed immense diplomatic skills to the South Korean policy makers. China's stern opposition to the US-proposed deployment of Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) in South Korea to counter the possible future attack from North Korean missiles engendered wider debates on the security strategy of the South Koreans. In the light of these considerations, this paper attempts to analyse the changing security dynamics in East Asia posed by the China's assertiveness, US rebalancing acts, North Korean military provocations, Japan's new assertiveness and its impacts on South Korea's middle power diplomacy.

## **II. The Concept of Middle Power**

Middle power by simple definition is what it is not – it is neither a great power nor a small power. The concept of 'middle power' is a controversial term in the study of foreign policy, as it involves defining relational terms, 'middle' and 'power'. In order to define 'middle' it is necessary to define the other two extremes - great and small. Although the use of the term can be traced back to the sixteenth century, the modern idea of middle powers being potentially significant actors in international affairs has been traced back to Jan Christian Smuts' writing on *The League of Nations: A Practical Suggestions* in 1918 (Evans, 2011). The term was institutionalised in the Canadian context in the 1930s with the writing of David Mitrany on world government and was popularised in Canada's persistent claim to middle power status and its firm embraced in its foreign policy. Australia also adopted middle power diplomacy alongside Canada after the end of the World War II in order to promote its role in international affairs. Other countries like Norway, Sweden and New Zealand followed the same policy and are most commonly identified as 'traditional' or 'first generation' of middle powers. South Korea is regarded as a 'new' or 'late comer' which belongs to the emerging group, regionally active in the fourth wave of middle powers.

As there is an ambiguity in its concept, identifying middle powers has become a highly contested among scholars. No two different authors fully agreed upon the parameters of classifying middle powers. As Adam Chapnick rightly notes, 'For all its importance, middle power is rarely defined and limited explanations are never specific'. Three main approaches are useful in defining middle power – positional (material capacity), behavioural (good international citizenship called middlepowerism) and identity (identifying itself and recognised by others). Some countries meet only one of the above criteria while others meet all of them. Roughly twenty to twenty-five countries that possess material capabilities to shape the outcomes in niche areas in the global governance sphere when acting in concert the like-minded states are identified as middle powers (O' Neil, 2015).

## **III. South Korea's Middle Power Diplomacy**

South Korea is among the few countries that qualifies the status of a middle power, both in terms of material capacity and foreign policy behaviour. Economically, South Korea had joined the group of middle powers way back in the late 1980s, but its foreign policy did not reflect that of a middle power. The Gross Domestic Product (nominal) of South Korea in 2014 was \$1.4 trillion and ranked the 13<sup>th</sup> largest economy in the world. Its per capita income (PPP) as per IMF report in 2014 was \$35,379. In 2012, it became the seventh member of the 20K-50M club - countries with per capita income of \$20,000 and a population of 50 million.

Lee Myung-bak who took office as the tenth President of South Korea (or Korea) on February 25, 2008 earnestly pursued middle power diplomacy in commensurate with its material capacity. Under the banner of 'Global Korea', Lee sought to restore the US-ROK alliance as the basis of his foreign policy, while at the same time strengthening its relationships with key regional powers. Terming the two preceding terms as lost decades, Lee advocated for reciprocity in his North Korea policy and focused on promoting Korea's global role by moving away from its obsession with North Korean military threat. He laid out the beginnings of a vision for Korea as a responsible and contributing member of the international community committed to global diplomacy and the global movement for peace and development (Snyder, 2009).

In his pursuit of enhancing Korea's status to the international community, Lee administration adopted low carbon 'Green Growth' as a national vision in 2008 and made its entry into the member of OECD Development Assistance Committee in 2009. As a host country of the G20 Summit in 2010, South Korea pledged to reduce CO2 emissions by 30 percent by 2020. Korea was also able to push its agenda of eliminating poverty and sustainable development by 2015 at the High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness held in Busan in 2011. The hosting of Seoul Nuclear Security Summit in 2012 enhanced Korea's leadership role from 'follower to rule maker'.

The thinking of Korea's middle power diplomacy has been provoked by the dramatic shift in the nature of international system (Yul, 2013). The rise of China and India created space for South Korea to play greater role in international arena. It was also prompted by South Koreans' changing perception; from a victimised small power to having attained the status of middle power. Moreover, South Korean leaders felt the need to repay back the contributions of international community for its economic development during the period following the Korean War 1950-53. First mentioned during Roh Tae-woo administration (1988-1993) and touched upon during Roh Moo-hyun (2003-2008) administration, 'middle power or jung-gyun-guk diplomacy' received prominent airing following the formation of Lee's administration (Lee, 2012). Lee's year of inauguration also witnessed the founding of G20<sup>2</sup> as a replacement of G8 to combat the financial crisis which started in 2007 which widened Korea's leadership role.

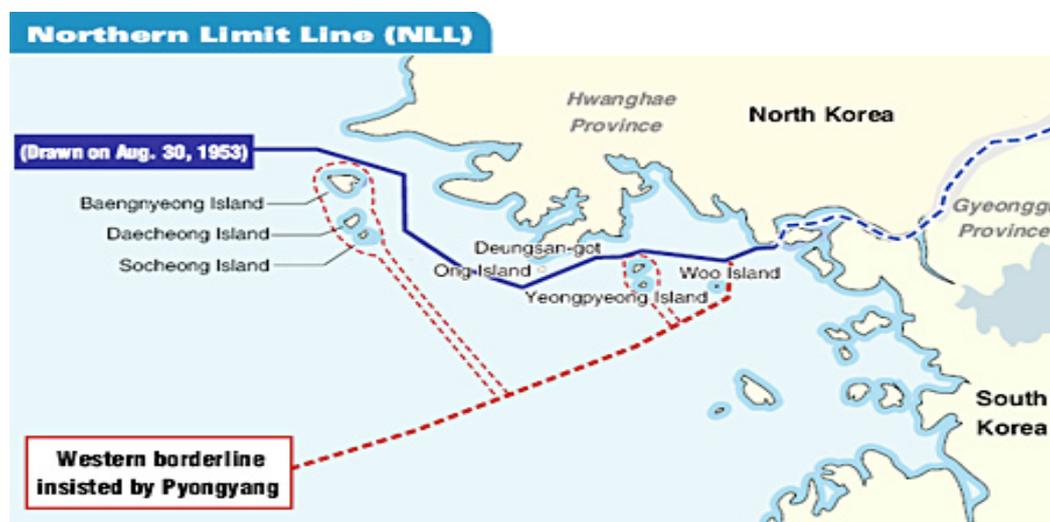
Korea's middle power diplomacy under Lee Myung-bak has enhanced its international image which is greatly different from the previous governments. As Joseph S. Nye (2009) noted, "quietly South Korea has moved away from being defined by its problematic North Korean neighbour, and is becoming an important middle-ranking power in global affairs". President Park Geun-hye, who succeeded Lee on February 25, 2013 continues to pursue middle power diplomacy as one of her foreign policy goals under the banner of Trustpolitik. Despite its success at the global level, the burgeoning great power rivalries coupled with the North Korea's military threat constrain South Korea's middle power diplomacy at the regional level.

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<sup>2</sup> The G20 countries account for 66 per cent of world's population, 80 per cent of the global GDP, and at the same time produce 80 per cent of the world's global greenhouse gas emissions.

#### IV. The Sinking of Cheonan and Its impacts on South Korea's Middle Power Diplomacy

The South Korean navy corvette Cheonan was sank in a mysterious way on the night of March 26, 2010 while conducting a patrol mission in the Yellow Sea (or West Sea) off the Baekryeong Island on the west coast of the Korean peninsula. The 1200-ton warship named after the South Korean city of the same name, meaning 'heavenly peace' split into two parts leading to the death of 46 sailors out of 104. President Lee Myung-bak set up the Joint Civil-Military Investigation Group (JIG) comprising of 22 military experts, 25 experts from top 10 Korean expert agencies, 3 members recommended by the National Assembly along with 24 foreign experts from the US, UK, Australia, Sweden and South Korea. The team released its preliminary report on April 16, suspecting North Korea's involvement behind the attack, as the incident took place at the disputed territory between North and South Korea.



NB: The blue line indicates the oceanic border as understood by South Korea; the red line indicates the border as insisted by North Korea.

Map 1: Map of two different military demarcation line  
(Source: <https://mouonekorea.wordpress.com>)

The following day, North Korea denied its involvement in the attack, but this did not change the suspicion from the South Koreans due to any clear alternative explanation. The final report of the JIG released on May 20 concluded that the torpedo was fired by North Korean submarine. A key piece of evidence produced by the investigation team was the discovery of the torpedo on the seabed bearing a blue '1 bon' (No.1 written in Korean) ink mark consistent with the previously obtained North Korean torpedo (You, 2015). Their conclusion, however, has remained the subject of intense controversy. An independent Russian naval expert team also reached a mark contrast conclusion from the findings of the JIG. The team concluded that that it was not a torpedo but a floating mine in the water that was responsible for the ship's sinking



Map 2: Possible North Korean attack. (Source: <http://www.abovetopsecret.com>)

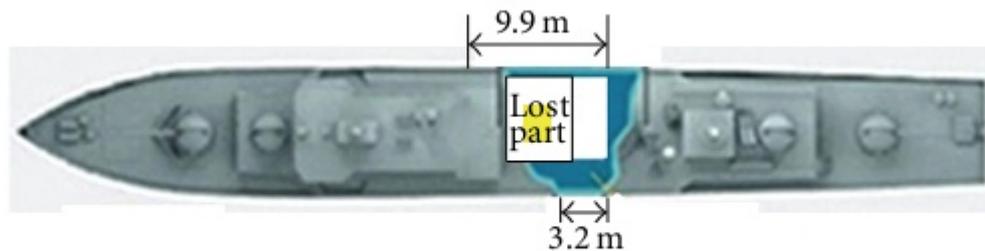
### **Domestic Impacts of Cheonan Sinking**

As days went on, suspicions grew over the findings of the investigation team as to how the ink mark could have survived the enormous heat of the explosion, while the paint on the outer surface of the torpedo did not. In a survey conducted in 2011 by the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, 80 percent respondents trust the government's announcement that the Cheonan was attacked by a North Korean submarine. However, in another poll conducted by Media Research in 2012, of the 700 people, 71.3 percent believed that the ship was attacked by North Korea. This indicates that a growing number of people started to question the findings of the investigation team.

In the absence of substantial evidence, various conspiracy theories have been circulating on the internet and social media. Some believe that Cheonan may have hit a mine laid by the South Korean military or collided with a US submarine, while some suspect that the warship may have been torn apart due to metal fatigue fractures as a result of poor maintenance. Some even believe that a team of US Navy Seals who had recently been involved in the joint US-South Korean Foal Eagle anti-submarine exercises, sunk the Cheonan using a magnetic 'rising mine' deployed on the sea bed. Other believe that the US carried out the sinking as a pretext to scare the Japanese into allowing them to keep their controversial military base on Okinawa which America says is essential for deploying marines to secure North Korean nuclear facilities in the event of war.



(a)



(b)

Figure 1: (a) Cheonan warship; (b) Sketch of the part damaged during the incident (Hwang and Mauro, 2014)

The Lee Myung-bak government stuck to its stand and called for a hawkish policy towards the North. Many of the South Koreans argued that Lee government's accusations of North Korea were aimed at avoiding heavy defeat at the June 2 local elections. Lee adopted the May 24<sup>th</sup> Measures, which among other things, called for banning of visits by South Koreans to North Korea, halting of all North-South trade, prohibiting business expansion by South Koreans in the north, halting of all aid projects, and prohibiting North Korean ships from sailing in South Korean waters. Following the introduction of these measures, all businesses in Kaesong Industrial Complex were stopped. Since then inter-Korean relations has become weakened and the two Koreas are hostile to each other.

### **Regional Impacts of Cheonan Sinking**

The Cheonan sinking not only widened the divisions between progressives and conservatives but also ensued regional split as US took this opportunity to sustain its military dominance in the region to balance China. China's reluctance to condemn North Korea led to mutual distrust and antagonism between Beijing and Washington. With the increasing perceptions of military threat from North Korea, Japan's decision to relocate US military station from Okinawa was held back in the wake of Cheonan sinking. China's diplomatic shielding of North Korea on the two incidents prompted South Koreans doubt about the 'strategic partnership' between the two countries and China's status as 'a responsible stakeholder' in the region.

The relationship between North Korea and China became much closer than before on the heel of the Cheonan sinking. The North Korean leader Kim Jong-Il made a secret visit to China for the first time in four years, on May 3, 2010 in a special train amidst the military tensions prevailing on the peninsula. Similarly, US-Korea alliance has been strengthened to prevent any future North Korean attack. Prior to the Cheonan incident, all clashes that had occurred were managed in a strictly inter-Korean context.

However, the Cheonan sinking has become an intense issue at the international level due to the geopolitical rivalry between China and US.

## **VI. The Impact of Yeonpyeong Island Attack on South Korea's Middle Power Diplomacy**

The North Korea soldiers fired around 200 artillery shells at Yeonpyeong Island, which lies in the Yellow Sea, 50 miles off the South's northwest coast in an area close to a disputed sea border, on November 23, 2010. The shelling killed two South Korean marines, two civilians and hurt another 19, in one of the heaviest attacks on its neighbour since the Korean War ended in 1953. The South Korean soldiers in return shelled North Korean gun positions. The incident is believed to have been sparked by South Korean military exercises in the area, which the North had objected to. It is also widely believed to bolster the North Korean army's support for the succession of the ailing Kim Jong-il's youngest son, Kim Jong-un. The North Korea's supreme military command, however, blamed the South for the incident and accused the South Korean army of firing first artillery shells, which the latter denied.

The islands were the scene of three skirmishes between the navies of North and South Korea in 1999, 2002 and most recently in 2009 when a North Korean patrol ship was set on fire by South Korean gunfire, but the latest comes at a time of rising regional tension. Seoul promised that it would be ready to respond strongly to further attacks. There was condemnation of North Korea from various countries including the US, Japan, Russia, EU and the UK, while China refused to apportion blame. Instead it blamed the US-Korea joint military exercise as triggering the North Korea's attack and appealed all sides to remain calm. China's refusal to criticise North Korea's violent act in the Cheonan sinking, to a certain degree was justifiable, considering the lack of evidence on the part of the investigation team.

However, China's silence on the North Korean shelling of the Yeonpyeong Island this time called into question of its status as 'responsible stakeholder' in the region. China's attempt to restore its reputation as an honest broker in the Korean crisis by calling an emergency meeting of the senior representatives of the Six-Party Talks – US, China, North and South Korea, Japan and Russia did not receive positive response from the US, Japan and South Korea which further cast doubt on the efficacy of the Chinese initiative. South Korea on, its part, has been insisting North Korea's apology on Cheonan sinking and Yeonpyeong Island attack as a precondition to resume the inter-Korean peace talks.

## **VII. The Impacts of the US Proposal to Install THAAD**

The Terminal (formerly Theatre) High Altitude Area Defence (THAAD) missile system is an easily transportable defensive weapon system to protect against hostile incoming threats such as tactical and theatre ballistic missiles at ranges of 200km and at altitudes up to 150km. It can shoot down short, medium and intermediate-range ballistic missiles. The system consists of launchers, missiles, battle management/command, control, communications and intelligence (BMC3I) units, THAAD radars, and intercepts exo-atmospheric and endo-atmospheric threats. The US proposal to install THAAD came in the wake of the third North Korean nuclear test on February 12, 2013. The primary purpose is to protect the soldiers and combat assets of US Forces in Korea (USFK) against increasingly direct nuclear and missile threats. In addition, in terms of a strategic military perspective, the implementation of the tailored

deterrence strategy (TDS) by the deployment of THAAD to the Korean theater will reinforce extended deterrence strategy (EDS) to deter North Korean nuclear and missile attacks (Chung 2015).

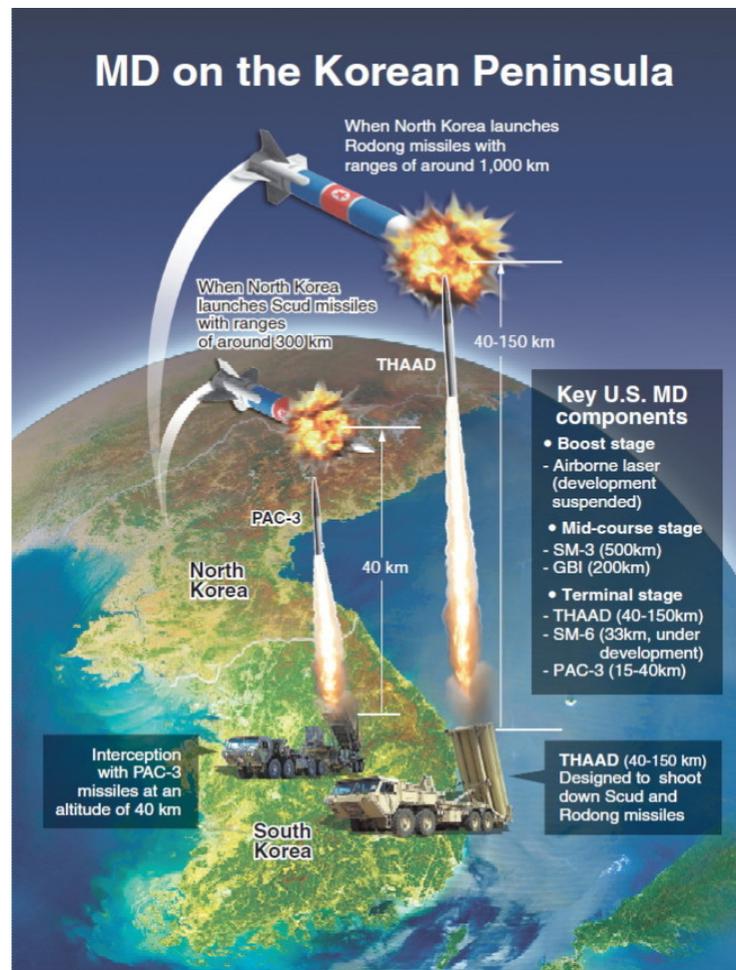
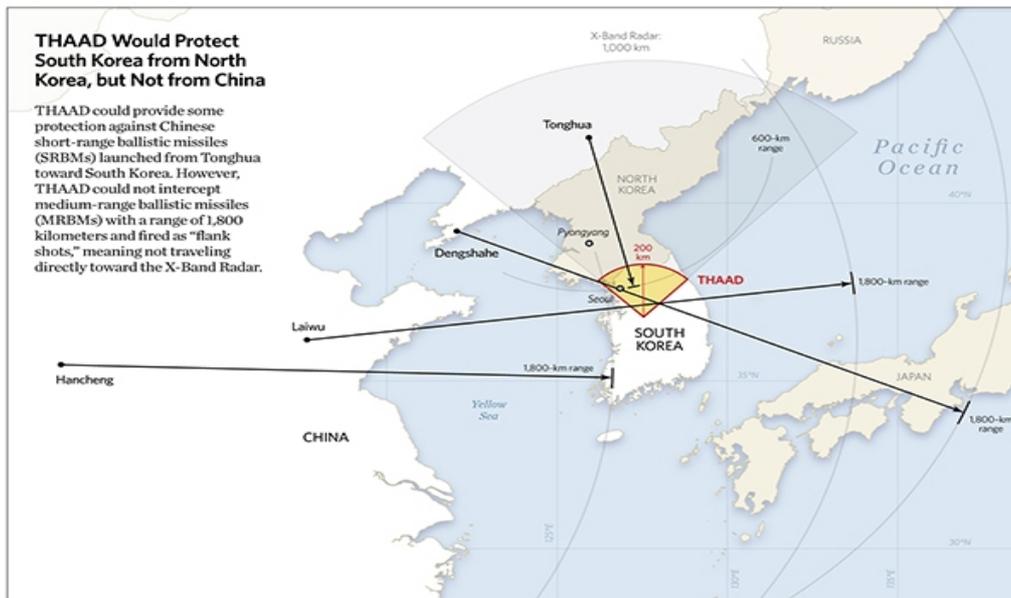


Figure 2: Missile Defence on the Korean Peninsula (Source: The Korea Herald)

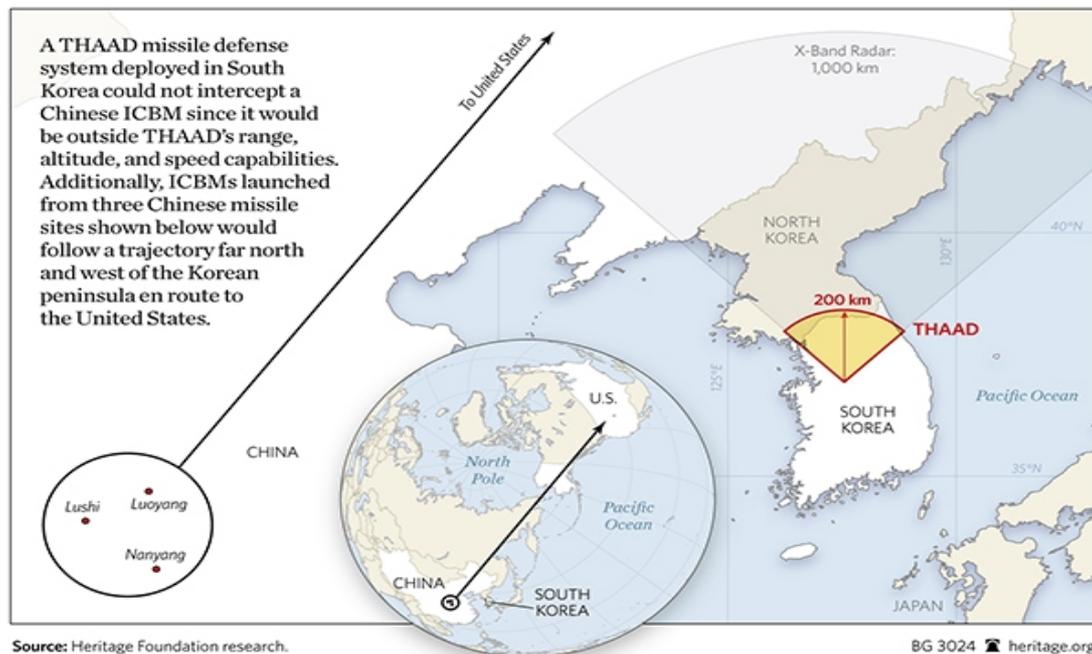
Despite the intense debates on the pros and cons of the missile defence, the majority of South Koreans are in favour of installing THAAD due to the growing fear of missile attacks from North Korea. The Defense White Paper 2014 published by the South Korean Ministry of Nation Defense estimated that North Korea is in a substantial position to obtain ballistic missile capabilities delivering nuclear warheads and develop KN-08 intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) threatening the continental US. In 2014, North Korea test-fired 111 missile rounds consisting of FROG, SCUD, ER, and Rodong Missiles in order to increase accuracy of their missiles. The February 2015 Joongang Ilbo poll showed that 56% of the respondents favoured the deployment of THAAD. South Korean presidential spokesman Min Kyung-wook described Seoul's position as three 'no's'— "no [US deployment] request, no consultation, and no decision."



Map 3: Showing how THAAD would protect South Korea only from the North (Source: The Heritage Foundation Research)

China has been raising its concern and strong opposition to the installation of THAAD on the fear that the radar will be able to detect military movements in China. Russia too considers the deployment of THAAD system in South Korea as a security threat to its security and the wider region. It further raises its concern over the possibility of sparking an arms race and hampering negotiations on North Korea's nuclear ambitions. US officials have continually insisted that THAAD would be aimed at guarding against only North Korea's growing ballistic missile capabilities. "The THAAD interceptor has a range of 200 kilometers. Its range means that a THAAD interceptor - if based at Osan Air Base, a likely U.S. option (for the potential deployment) - could not reach as far north as Pyongyang - it would fall about 65 kilometers short," said Bruce Bennett, a senior analyst at the US think tank RAND Corp. However, China does not want to compromise on its stands, which observers suspect its fear of potentially weakening its A2/AD capabilities. There are also speculations that China wants to weaker the US-Korea alliance through its opposition to THAAD. There are some who suspect that China might want to see how South Korea response its pressure to take sides.

## THAAD in South Korea Poses No Threat to China's Global Security Interests



Map 4: Map showing how China is not a threat to THAAD  
(Source: The Heritage Foundation Research)

South Korea has been in strategic dilemma on whether it should go along with the US and install the THAAD or whether it should listen to China and oppose the plan. It neither wants to disappoint China, its largest trading partner nor the US, its security guarantor. There is a speculation that China may retaliate against South Korea in the form of banning trade and enhancing travel regulations, if it allows the US to set up THAAD. On the other hand, if South Korea listened to China and opposed THAAD installation, it can cause US abandonment when it needs US security protection in the future.

## VII. The Impact of Japan's New Assertiveness on South Korea's Middle Power Diplomacy

The issue of comfort women<sup>3</sup> and territorial dispute over Dokdo Island<sup>4</sup> are the two main bones of contention that hinder the two countries' path to peaceful cooperation. An estimate 200,000 Korean women, mostly under the age 18 were forced by the Imperial Japanese Army to have sexual relationship with 30-40 men each day in the military brothels before and after the World War II. Korea has been demanding sincere apology for the atrocity and compensation for the victims which the Japanese parliament did it by issuing an official apology on March 27, 2007. The situation took an ugly turn when Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and most members of his Cabinet who are openly supporting revisionist organisation, negated the existence of Japanese war crimes, including sexual slavery for the military. This created public anger among the South Koreans.

<sup>3</sup>. Estimates vary as to how many women were involved, with numbers ranging from as low as 20,000 to as high as 360,000 to 410,000, in Chinese sources.

<sup>4</sup> The Liancourt Rocks, called Dokdo in Korean and Takeshima in Japanese, are a group of islets in the Sea of Japan that is occupied by South Korea but its ownership is still disputed between South Korea and Japan.

When the news of Lee Myung-bak government's signing of General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) with Japan came out in July 2012, it created public uproar in South Korea. The Lee government widely regarded as pro-Japanese, has long prepared GSOMIA which was aimed at formalising a long standing commitment to share intelligence and security information on North Korea and missile programmes. The signing of the agreement had to be cancelled due to the protest on Japan's unwillingness to apologise for their use of comfort women as sex slaves during the colonial period.

Faced by public anger over the issue of GSOMIA, Lee Myung-bak was left only with the Dokdo Island issue. The Island is a major source of nationalist tensions between the two nations. Lee made a visit to Dokdo in 2012 in order to regain the public support. This angered the Japanese government, which was considering filing a complaint letter against South Korea at the International Court of Justice. It was also considering suspending a currency contract with South Korea that expanded the amount from \$13 billion to \$70 billion in an attempt to stabilize the foreign exchange market (Sohn and Kang, 2013). The two contentious issues between the two countries constrain South Korea's regional strategies for middle power diplomacy. It also hampers US Pivot to Asia, which Korea needs, in order to effectively balance against the influence of China.

### **VIII. Conclusion**

South Korea's rise as a middle power provides a unique case, as the country is surrounded by great powers and a hostile nuclear-armed North Korea. The success of South Korea's middle power under Lee Myung-bak at the global level is a remarkable achievement. Seoul's growing leadership role and its commitment to combat global issues looks a too ambitious aspiration, yet an exemplary step for other small and middle power countries.

However, its diplomatic skill has been tested time and again by North Korean military provocations. This raises the question of Seoul's ability to sustain its long term policy goal of unification with the North under democratic government and open market system. In order to make a headway in dealing with Pyongyang, South Korean leaders should avoid using North Korea issue as a mere vote bank politics, so that there can be common consistent policy which is acceptable to both the conservatives and progressives. South Korea's middle power policy is a strategy to induce the support of international community for this goal. Unfortunately, the reality of its geopolitical challenges loomed large in the face of the US-China rivalries. China's strong opposition to the deployment of THAAD in Korea can be interpreted as China's growing assertiveness on the Korean peninsula.

The peaceful cooperation of US and China best serve South Korea's middle power diplomacy at the regional level. The strong security ties with US and close economic partnership with China acted as the twin pillars of South Korea's middle power diplomacy. South Korea fears that any military conflict between the two great powers will force South Korea to make a choice between the two. It is, therefore, a great challenge for South Korea to maintain a balanced-relationship with both countries.

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