

South Korean Democrats posture as opponents of US anti-ballistic missile system

By Ben McGrath
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Following last month's announcement that the US would deploy a Terminal High-Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) battery to South Korea, the Minjoo Party of Korea (MPK) and its allies are attempting to head-off growing public hostility to the decision. Their stance is entirely disingenuous, with this "progressive block" seeking to posture as an alternative to Washington's war drive in the region.

The main opposition MPK, or Democrats, alongside the People's Party and the Justice Party, in the National Assembly, are opposing THAAD on the grounds of environmental and health concerns, without addressing the growing threat of war. On August 3, the three parties announced a joint panel to investigate the anti-ballistic missile battery's deployment. While MPK interim head Kim Jong-in has not taken a clear public stance on THAAD, the party will choose a new chief this month and each candidate has criticized the weapon system.

The same day, 10 MPK members toured the proposed THAAD site in Seongju, a city 210 kilometers southeast of Seoul, to give nominal support to the city's residents who have held numerous protests against the government's decision. Kim Hong-geol, the son of former President Kim Dae-jung, suggested the party would "soon position itself against THAAD deployment as an official stance."

While the MPK hopes to exploit the THAAD issue to boost support in next year's presidential election, its underlying concern is the potential economic impact. "We cannot help being worried over the strong opposition from China and Russia, along with the possible economic restrictions that can be implemented by Beijing [on South Korea]," Kim Jong-in said in July. China is South Korea's largest trading partner.

At the same time, the Democrats are seeking to

prevent the issue from becoming the focus for widespread anti-war sentiment among workers and youth.

The THAAD's purpose is not to defend against so-called North Korean aggression as Washington and Seoul claim, but to prepare for a nuclear war with China. The South Korean THAAD installation is part of a wider anti-ballistic missile system being erected to protect US bases from any Chinese counterattack following a first strike by the US military. THAAD includes interceptor missiles and the AN/TPY-2 X-band radar system, designed to identify and knockout incoming attacks.

The anti-ballistic missile system is bound up with Washington's "pivot to Asia" and broader military build-up throughout the region that seeks to reinforce American dominance and subordinate China to the interests of American imperialism.

The MPK is attempting to strike a balance between Washington and Beijing in order to try to maintain the alliance with the US without alienating China and provoking economic retaliation. MPK lawmakers intend to visit Beijing today. Kim Yeong-ho, the chief of the party's THAAD committee, questioned the government's claim that China will not impose trade sanctions against South Korean firms, saying: "We plan to look into the probability by exploring contradictory information."

Park Ji-won, the floor leader of the People's Party, expressed the conundrum facing the South Korean ruling elites last month, declaring: "Although we cannot think of the Korean Peninsula without the Seoul-Washington alliance, we cannot ignore the economy as well." All the opposition parties fully back South Korea's military alliance with the US and the arms build-up in the region.

While supporting the US military presence in South Korea, former MPK leader Moon Jae-in has sought to stir up nationalism by suggesting that South Korea should take a more independent stance and strengthen its own military. “The military is weak and has to rely on US forces,” he wrote recently. “The defense industry is tainted with corruption. This is the hard reality of the country’s defense system under the Park Geun-hye government.” Moon ran for president against Park in 2012 and has aspirations for a 2017 run.

President Park’s ruling conservative Saenuri Party has strong connections to the military and the US alliance. The Democrats, on the other hand, represent layers of business seeking closer economic relations with China and entertaining the hope of turning North Korea into an ultra-cheap labor platform. The Sunshine Policy of former presidents Kim Dae-jung and Noh Moo-hyun aimed at easing tensions with North Korea and opening it up to South Korean investment, but that policy was effectively sabotaged by US President George W. Bush.

In a speech on August 15 last year, Moon called for the removal of the May 24 sanctions imposed by Seoul on Pyongyang saying: “It wasn’t North Korea who suffered an economic blow as a result of the May 24 sanctions, but rather South Korean companies.” These measures were put in place in 2010 following the sinking of the Cheonan, a South Korean naval vessel, for which North Korea was blamed despite questions regarding its involvement. Democrats similarly opposed Seoul’s closing of the Kaesong Industrial Complex in North Korea in February, where South Korean companies employed North Korean workers.

At the time of Moon’s speech, the People’s Party was still formally aligned with the Democrats in the New Politics Alliance for Democracy, the MPK’s previous name. The People’s Party, along with the Justice Party, represents corporate interests concerned about maintaining trade and investment with China. They make only token references to the danger of war in the region and, like the MPK, are holding out the prospect of further discussion in the National Assembly as a means of dispelling public anger over the issue.

“Article 60 of the constitution requires parliamentary approval of a treaty that imposes a financial burden vital to national security and the people,” Justice Party leader Sim Sang-jeong said in July. “The THAAD

deployment and related aspects of the agreement must pass through parliamentary proceedings.”

Significantly, the MPK avoided any discussion of THAAD prior to April’s general election, despite formal negotiations on its deployment beginning just a month earlier. All the opposition parties are determined to prevent a public debate over South Korea’s integration into US war plans. Democrat presidents Kim Dae-jung and Noh Moo-hyun each backed the US-led wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, sending troops to both countries despite widespread anti-war sentiment.

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