

Loosening or Tightening the Linchpin? The Effects of China's Approach to US THAAD Deployment in South Korea

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China's coercive response to the 2016 deployment of the US Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) missile defense system in South Korea has been dubbed as its attempt to "loosen the linchpin" of the ROK-US alliance. By reviewing the post-THAAD changes in South Korea's THAAD deployment and strategic debates in the domestic sphere, this paper seeks to study the effects of China's coercion on South Korea's security choices. This paper is structured in two parts: First, how and to what extent has China's coercion caused procedural changes in the THAAD-related decision-making process, policy content, and the ultimate change in the decision on THAAD? Second, how have key actors' overall perceptions and rhetoric about China changed after the THAAD turmoil? The main findings of this study suggest that China's coercion has caused a hardening than "loosening" of the security linchpin of the ROK-US alliance.

Keywords Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD), ROK-China relations, ROK-US alliance, discourse, South Korea

INTRODUCTION

China's coercive response to the 2016 decision to deploy the US Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) missile defense system in South Korea has been dubbed as its attempt to "loosen the linchpin" of the ROK-US alliance (Pak, 2020; Work, 2020). China rolled out a series of administrative directives targeting South Korea, such as banning Chinese citizens from visiting the ROK, imposing tax evasion charges, expanding customs inspection procedures, and raising non-tariff barriers. While a significant

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This paper only reflects the author's views and analysis and does not represent the position of the affiliated institute. An earlier version of the paper was presented at the 15th Biennial Conference of the Nordic Association for China Studies (NACS) – 14th Annual Nordic Institute of Asian Studies (NIAS) Council Conference on June 10, 2021, at the University of Helsinki.

Article Received: 28-03-2022 Revised: 25-04-2022 Accepted: 23-05-2022

number of related studies have accumulated as ROK–China relations “flip-flopped” on the THAAD issue (Kim, 2021), this study finds that one of the remaining empirical gaps in the existing literature lies in the discussion about the THAAD’s impact on the ROK–US alliance, specifically regarding South Korea’s security choices. To what extent was China successful at influencing and/or reshaping South Korea’s security choices?

Existing literature has focused on the origins and causes of the THAAD turmoil; much of the literature evaluates (Kim, 2017) and explains the ROK government’s behaviors and strategic considerations (Kim, 2016; Song, 2020; Oh, 2020), China’s strategic intentions forwarded through coercive diplomacy (Cho, 2021; Kim, 2018; Sohn, 2019), and the overall impact on ROK–China relations (Friedhoff *et al.*, 2019; Friedman, 2019; Ju, 2020; Kim, 2018; Lee, 2017; Lee and Kim, 2017; Perlez, Landler, and Choe, 2017). Although a growing number of studies have examined how China’s coercive responses will be “counterproductive” (Snyder, 2016)—that China will damage its reputation in South Korea while doing little toward “finding a malleable partner” in efforts to counter the United States’ influence in the region (Park, 2017, pp. 16–17)—attempts to evaluate the actual impact on South Korea’s alliance-centered security choices have been limited. Against this backdrop, this study finds it timely to review whether the pressure Beijing has exerted has brought about the intended effect of driving a wedge between Seoul and Washington (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of PRC, 2016a, 2017a).

By reviewing the post-THAAD changes in South Korea’s THAAD deployment and discourses on ROK–China relations in the domestic sphere, this study seeks to examine the effects of China’s coercion on South Korea’s security choices. With reference to studies measuring policy impact (Jones and Villar, 2008) and the “efficacy” of a state’s foreign affairs (Jones, 2011) in diplomatic relations (Bagozzi and Landis, 2015; Moyer, Turner, and Meisel, 2020), this study proposes to evaluate the THAAD issue in two major parts: first, by looking at the procedural changes as well as the ultimate change in the decision—that is, how and to what extent has China’s coercion caused changes in the THAAD-related decision-making process, policy content, and the ultimate change in the decision on THAAD?—and second, by observing the changes in key actors’ overall perceptions, attitudes, and rhetoric on China. The main assumption here is that “The perspectives of the leaders . . . can have more influence on what governments do” (Hermann and Hagan, 1998, p. 125), as their ideas “circulate, converge, and disperse across diverse communication spaces,” influencing both the strategic choices and public opinion of a state (Dahlgren, 2005, p. 148). As will be elaborated later, this study focuses on analyzing changes in government policy and THAAD rhetoric in policy communities and also in the views of key opinion leaders, experts, and former officials of the past progressive and conservative governments.

The main findings of this paper suggest that China’s coercion has caused a tightening than “loosening” of the security linchpin of the ROK-US alliance. Most notably, South Korea’s decision about THAAD deployment has not changed to date. In terms of major agents’ perceptions, attitudes, and rhetoric about China, this study found a hardening of “alliance-first” security rhetoric among the conservatives. While progressive agents, including Moon Jae-in administration, pursued “balanced diplomacy” between the United States and China and flexibility in the ROK-US alliance,

such position gradually weakened after China's coercive responses.

DEBATING THE THAAD TURMOIL AND SOUTH KOREA'S SECURITY CHOICES

Before the THAAD turmoil, ROK–China relations seemed to be at an historic high. Given the spillover from deepened economic interdependency as China replaced the United States as South Korea's largest trading partner in 2003, ROK–China relations seemed to move forward in the political sphere, reaching their best years in terms of a “strategic cooperative relationship” (Ye, 2017, p. 5) in 2013–2016, as then ROK President Park Geun-hye (2013–2017) pledged to restore “balanced diplomacy” with the United States and supported President Xi Jinping's Chinese dream and neighborhood diplomacy (Pak, 2020; Yu, 2016). During President Xi's state visit to South Korea in 2014, President Park mentioned that the “convergence” of the Chinese and Korean dreams would “promote peace, stability, and prosperity of the Northeast Asian region” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of PRC, 2014). With the rollout of high-level dialogues and the free trade agreement, President Park also decided to join the China-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), raising concerns on the US side. President Park's presence at China's military parade in 2015—commemorating the seventieth anniversary of the end of World War Two at Tiananmen Square—further sparked controversies regarding whether South Korea may have swung to China's side at the expense of the ROK–US alliance.

South Korea's decision to deploy THAAD was, against this backdrop, a sharp turn away from the developments in ROK–China relations. The seeds of trouble were present as early as 2013, when the US side revealed that it was considering THAAD deployment in South Korea. While the official position of the ROK government was to deny any discussions with the United States,¹ Lockheed Martin revealed in October 2015 that South Korea and the United States had begun unofficial consultations regarding THAAD. President Park Geun-hye announced for the first time in his New Year's Address on January 13, 2016, that South Korea may “consider deployment of THAAD based on its security and national interests.” This was the South Korean government's response to North Korea's fourth nuclear test on January 6, 2016, as well as to the failure to elicit the desired response from China regarding North Korea's nuclear ambitions.² Following North Korea's test launch of a long-range rocket on February 7, 2016, the ROK Ministry of Defense announced on the same day its decision to begin official consultation with the United States regarding THAAD deployment. By July 8, 2016, South Korea had announced its formal decision to deploy THAAD. South Korea installed two THAAD launchers in Seongju on April 26, 2017. While the newly

¹ The ROK Ministry of Defense denied any talks with the United States on the matter of THAAD in October 2014; then Defense Minister Han Min-koo again denied any ROK–US consultations on the THAAD issue in February 2015.

² President Xi refused to take calls from President Park for about a month following North Korea's nuclear test in January 2016 (Lee, 2016).

inaugurated Moon Jae-in administration (May 2017–present) seemed to reverse the THAAD decision, North Korea's continued nuclear and ballistic missile tests, including the sixth nuclear test on September 3, 2017, led to the deployment of four additional THAAD launchers by September 2017. Throughout the process, China's response was coercive and immediate, ranging from diplomatic verbal threats to economic sanctions.

While a significant number of related studies accumulated as ROK–China relations flip-flopped on the THAAD issue, this study finds that one of the remaining empirical gaps in the existing literatures lies in the discussion about THAAD's impact on the ROK–US alliance, specifically regarding South Korea's security choices. To what extent was China successful at influencing and/or reshaping South Korea's security choices? Does the restoration and/or amelioration of ROK–China relations despite South Korea's THAAD deployment suggest the failure of China's "coercive gambit?" (Glaser and Collins, 2017)

Existing scholarship has mostly centered on the origins and causes of the THAAD turmoil; much of the literature evaluates (Kim, 2017) and explains the ROK government's behaviors and strategic considerations (Kim, 2016; Oh, 2020; Song, 2020), China's strategic intentions forwarded through coercive responses (Cho, 2021; Kim, 2018; Sohn, 2019), and the overall impact on ROK–China relations (Friedman, 2019; Friedhoff *et al.*, 2019; Ju, 2020; Kim, 2018; Lee, 2017; Lee and Kim, 2017; Perlez, Landler, and Choe, 2017). Although a growing number of studies have deliberated on how China's coercive responses have been "counterproductive" (Snyder, 2016) – damaging its reputation in South Korea while doing little in "finding a malleable partner" in efforts to counter the US's influence in the region (Park, 2017, 16-17) – attempts to evaluate the impact on South Korea's alliance-centered security choices have been limited. Bonnie S. Glaser and Lisa Collins (2017), for instance, argued that "Beijing's willingness to restore normal bilateral ties despite Seoul's refusal to remove THAAD suggests that China's coercive gambit failed." However, the authors stressed that such a conclusion may be premature. Jung H. Pak (2020) contemplated China's attempts to "loosen the linchpin" in depth and noted that China is "likely to continue to exploit perceived gaps in [the ROK–US alliance]"; however, qualitative evaluations on the actual impact were neglected. In a similar vein, Scott Snyder's article on the Council on Foreign Relations, entitled "China's Limited Retaliation Options Against the THAAD Deployment in South Korea" (2016), is an "admonition" rather than an "analysis" on how "China cannot hope to maintain friendly relations with its neighbors through economic threats and bullying." Florence Yang (2019) discussed whether and to what extent China adopted coercive measures, but the research does not assess the intended effects of China's actions such as the impact on South Korea's security orientation between the United States and China.

Although this study acknowledges Glaser and Collins' (2017) point that a longer timeframe is required to determine how China's coercion has influenced and/or changed the trajectory of South Korea's strategic choices, it is meaningful to accumulate analyses in the meantime.

Measuring Policy Impact in Bilateral Relations

Measuring policy impact (Jones and Villar, 2008) and the "efficacy" of a state's foreign

affairs (Jones, 2011) in diplomatic relations (Bagozzi and Landis, 2015; Bezerra *et al.*, 2015; Dafoe, Renshon, and Huth, 2014; Moyer, Turner, and Meisel, 2020) is a widely debated topic in international relations scholarship. While studies on “objective criteria” (Axelrod, 1976; Herman, 1980; Holsti, 1963) for assessing and understanding policy impact in state relations have continued to accumulate, this study proposes to evaluate the THAAD issue according to the five dimensions of policy impact (Jones, 2011, p. 2; Jones and Villar, 2008). The first dimension is attitudinal change, which entails examining the impact on key stakeholders’ awareness, perceptions, and overall attitudes. The second dimension encompasses changes in “discursive commitments,” that is, changes in key actors’ language and rhetoric. The third dimension is procedural change, which entails identifying changes in the decision-making process. The fourth dimension refers to observed changes in policy content. Lastly, the fifth dimension is behavioral change among key actors as a result of policy (Jones, 2011, p. 2). Against this backdrop, this study proposes a two-part analysis. First, this study seeks to analyze the third, fourth, and fifth policy impact dimensions, as follows: How and to what extent has China’s coercion caused procedural changes in the THAAD-related decision-making process (Dimension 3), policy content changes regarding THAAD (Dimension 4), and the ultimate change in the key actors’ decision (Dimension 5)? The overall impact of China’s retaliatory policies can be gauged via chronological and contextual analysis of the THAAD deployment process, China’s countermeasures, and changes in South Korea’s deployment process.

Second, the first two policy impact dimensions can be applied to determine how the South Korean government’s and leaders’ rhetoric/argument regarding the ROK–US alliance and/or ROK–China relations (attitudinal change among key actors; Dimension 1) and the language of commitments (discursive change, e.g., regarding commitment to the ROK–US alliance or to ROK–China relations; Dimension 2) have changed. The main assumption here is that security policies are influenced by agents’ perceptions and understanding of the given situation rather than by the “prevailing objective conditions in the world” (Holsti, 1963, p. 77). Unlike the predominant realist (Gilpin, 1984; Morgenthau, 1948; Waltz, 1979) and institutionalist (Allison, 1971; Keohane, 1984; Keohane and Martin, 1995) emphasis on systemic imperatives such as anarchy and interdependency, respectively, which provide little room or need to deliberate on domestic agents, this study concurs with Margaret G. Hermann and Joe D. Hagan (1998, p. 125) that “The perspectives of the leaders . . . can have more influence on what governments do,” particularly in this “ambiguous” post-Cold War era that invites “more room for interpretation . . . and miscommunication.” In what Castells (2008) calls a new constellation of “electronic public spheres,” leaders’ key ideas circulate, converge, and disperse across diverse communication spaces and influence both the strategic choices and public opinion of a state (Dahlgren, 2005, p. 148). Changes in the views of South Korean decision makers and opinion leaders can be a yardstick for measuring the impact of China’s coercion against South Korea’s THAAD deployment.

This study examines statements from the president, members of the National Defense Committee, and other key opinion leaders. Additionally, as another important point of analysis, this study analyzes changes in the views of key actors in the formulation and implementation of policies rooted in epistemic communities in

South Korea, namely The Korea Peace Forum (KPF) and Good Minds for the Korean Peninsula (*Gonggamhanbando* in Korean; GMKP). As will be elaborated later, the main rationale is that given South Korea's polarized political landscape (Milani, Fiori, and Dian, 2019; Park, 2020) and the short five-year single-term presidential system, the members of these two non-profit organizations play a key role in both the formulation and implementation of policy agenda. Both KPF and GMKP members—former officials and opinion leaders of past progressive and conservative governments, respectively—are key actors in designing presidential candidates' signature security, economic, and sociopolitical policy agendas, which are critical to winning the election. These members also become key actors in the new president's transition team; they are responsible for developing policy, and when the presidential term begins, they fill high-level positions of the National Security Council, ministries, key state-led organizations, and think-tanks, where they assist the president with policy implementation. While there are other informal and undisclosed groups that function as major policy and human resource platforms for presidential candidates in South Korea, key figures tend to be involved in either the KPF or the GMKP, and the members tend to overlap with other platforms with a similar political orientation.

The main ideas of KPF and GMKP members can be easily process-traced from the newspaper media and articles. As regular and interviewees of major news outlets in South Korea, the KPF and GMKP members have disseminated their key arguments that were first shared and collectively debated within themselves. Of course, their arguments appear in different news sources along the conservative and progressive political orientation; KPF members tend to contribute to progressive media such as *Hankyoreh*, *The Kyunghyan Shinmun*, *Pressian*, and *OhMyNews*, while GMKP members contribute to conservative media such as *The Chosun Ilbo*, *DongA Ilbo*, *Munhwa Ilbo*, and *JoongAng Ilbo*. When regularly issued briefs and publications are juxtaposed with members' later columns and articles, we can easily see close resemblances and track repercussions. Each individual engineers strategic debates, and the collective functions as the main hub of calibrated opinions in South Korea. Observation of their strategic debates can be a meaningful yardstick to gauge the effect of China's coercive response to South Korea's security debates.

THAAD DEPLOYMENT DESPITE CHINA'S COERCIVE MEASURES: CONTINUITY THAN CHANGE

How and to what extent has China's coercion caused procedural changes in the THAAD-related decision-making process, policy content and ultimate deployment? Via chronological and contextual analysis of the THAAD deployment process, this study argues that China's coercion has had a limited influence on reversing South Korea's THAAD decision.

While South Korea faltered against strong oppositions not only from China but also from its own domestic sphere, THAAD deployment remains as a continuity to this date. Namely, the USFK completed installation of two THAAD launchers in Seongju on April 26, 2017. While newly inaugurated Moon Jae-in administration (May 2017-current)

seemed to reverse the THAAD decision, North Korea's continued nuclear and ballistic missile tests including the sixth nuclear test on September 3, 2017, led to four additional THAAD deployments by September 2017. Additionally, as reflected in a recent statement from Gen. Robert Abrams, commander of the ROK-US Combined Forces Command and the USFK, South Korea and the United States are continuing to enhance THAAD and overall missile defense capabilities. During his farewell remarks, Abrams stated that the United States "is in the process of building three specific capabilities" (*Hankyoreh*, 2021). Although Abrams did not state the specifics, experts surmise that the USFK is putting forth its three-stage THAAD upgrade plan, which would enable remote control of the launchers, the use of THAAD radars (longer-range) within the Patriot system, and ultimately, the integration of the THAAD and Patriot systems (*The Chosun Ilbo*, 2021b). While the upgrade had its ups and downs since its disclosure to the public via US Missile Defense Agency Director Jon A. Hill's statement on March 12, 2020 (US House Armed Services Committee, 2020), Abrams' remarks and the reported entry of over forty supply vehicles to the Seongju base on April 28, 2021 (*The Chosun Ilbo*, 2021c) signal continuity and progress for ROK-US missile defense capabilities including THAAD.

Indeed, South Korea's THAAD deployments have continued despite China's coercive countermeasures since South Korea's decision to deploy THAAD in 2016. Following North Korea's test launch of a long-range rocket on February 7, 2016, for instance, the ROK Ministry of Defense announced on the same day its decision to begin official consultation with the United States regarding THAAD deployment. While China's first formal response was via diplomatic means and channels, such as Foreign Minister Wang Yi's visit to Seoul in the same month and the airing of China's "serious concerns" on the matter (February 11), followed by the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs' statement of "resolute opposition" to THAAD (February 15), the ROK Ministry of Defense went ahead with its announcement on February 22 that the ROK and the United States are in consultation to create a ROK-US Joint Working Group to discuss the USFK's THAAD deployment. On March 4, 2016, the ROK Ministry of Defense and the USFK formally signed an agreement to form the joint working group. When the final decision to deploy THAAD was announced on July 8, 2016 (US Department of Defense, 2016), Beijing continued its diplomatic demonstrations by summoning the US and ROK ambassadors to China. Indeed, on the same day as the announcement of the THAAD decision (July 8, 2016), Foreign Minister Zhang Yesui summoned US Ambassador to China Max Baucus and ROK Ambassador to China Kim Jang-soo and stressed that China "firmly opposes" THAAD deployment as it will "destabilize regional strategic balance, seriously undermine China's strategic security interests, and harm the maintenance of peace and stability in the Northeast Asian region" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of PRC, 2016b). Beijing also sought Russia's cooperation on the matter, announcing "serious concerns" and agreement on the "negative impacts" of THAAD as a result of a series of China-Russia consultations on Northeast Asia security (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of PRC, 2016c).³ When President Park Geun-hye and President Xi

³ On July 28, 2016, during the fourth China-Russia consultation on Northeast Asia security, Assistant Foreign Minister Kong Xuanyou and Deputy Foreign Minister Igor Morgulov of Russia co-chaired

Jinping met on September 5, 2016, President Xi again directly conveyed that “China opposes the deployment of the THAAD missile defense system by the US in the ROK” and stated that such a decision would “not [be] conducive” to both the “hard-won China–ROK relations” and “strategic stability in the region” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of PRC, 2016d).

In opposition to South Korea’s THAAD deployment plans, China began to level both official and unofficial verbal threats of retaliation, which were soon followed by the launch of unofficial forms of economic sanction. In December 2016, Chen Hai, deputy director general in the Chinese foreign ministry’s Department of Asian Affairs, made stern remarks during his meeting with ROK corporate executives in Seoul. He overtly stated that a “small country should not defy against major power” and that should Seoul choose to deploy THAAD, it would face severe countermeasures such as the “severing of diplomatic ties” (*Hankyoreh*, 2017). When the USFK began importing THAAD launchers on March 6, 2017, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs released on the following day its official statement that China “will take firm and necessary steps to safeguard [their] security interests” and that “All the consequences entailed shall be borne by the US and the ROK” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of PRC, 2017b). In tandem, group tours to South Korea were suspended (*China Daily*, 2018). Korean businesses in China were also indirectly but significantly affected. A source reports that South Korean restaurants in fifty cities across China have experienced, on average, a thirty percent sales cut since February 2017 (*China Daily*, 2018). Although China never confirmed the use of state directives, there are several instances where China did not deny its involvement in the sanctions. An exemplary case is spokesperson of the Chinese foreign ministry Geng Shuang’s press conference on March 7, 2017. In response to a reporter’s question about whether the ministry would confirm the Chinese government’s official involvement in closing South Korean Lotte Mart stores in China ostensibly due to “fire safety concerns,” the Chinese ministry failed to issue a denial, which is tacit admission of China’s use of countermeasures (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of PRC, 2017b):

Q: Over 20 Lotte Mart stores in China have been shut down due to fire safety concerns. Analysts said that China is taking countermeasures against Lotte because of THAAD. Do you agree with that?

A: I took a similar question yesterday. Our position on the issue of THAAD is clear and firm, and there is no need to repeat [it]. We have said multiple times that the Chinese government welcomes the investment and operation of foreign companies, including those of the ROK in China, and will protect their lawful rights and interests in accordance with the law, but their businesses should abide by Chinese laws and regulations.

Despite China’s coercion, the USFK installed two THAAD launchers in Seongju, South Korea by April 26, 2017, and four additional launchers by September 2017. Moreover, following President Moon’s state visit in December 2017, South Korea and China began revitalizing high-level exchanges, including six Korea–China summits,

the consultation. Representatives and experts associated with the foreign ministries and other relevant departments in both countries were present. Both sides expressed serious concerns over the advancement of the United States’ and the ROK’s intentions to deploy THAAD.

four talks between President Moon and Li Keqiang, and ten talks between the prime ministers and foreign ministers (ROK Policy Briefing, 2020). In 2018, regardless of the THAAD fallout, China still recorded approximately 268 billion dollars in revenue, almost twice the dollar amount of trade with the United States (132 billion dollars), according to International Monetary Fund data. More South Korean students have also begun to study in China than in the United States as of 2018: 63,000 Koreans in China versus 58,000 in the United States. Furthermore, about 68,000 Chinese students have gone to South Korea to study, while only 2,700 went to the United States (Korea Tourism Organization Database).

While China's coercion did not produce definitive changes in policy content or the ultimate decision regarding THAAD, there have been two notable procedural changes in the decision-making process. First, South Korea was pushed to declare THAAD to be a "temporary" decision. In September 2017, President Moon publicly announced that the government has determined THAAD deployment to be the "best action," albeit "temporary" (Cheong Wa Dae, 2018, pp. 316–318). He stated:

The government came to the conclusion that we could no longer postpone the temporary deployment of THAAD to prevent war on the Korean Peninsula and protect the lives and safety of the people. We have determined that this is the best action our government can take under the current circumstances . . . This deployment of THAAD is a temporary deployment considering the seriousness and urgency of security.

Second, China's coercion had some influence on South Korea regarding China's prominence in their future strategic considerations. South Korea's announcement of the "three nos"—no additional THAAD deployment, no participation in the US-led missile defense system, and no establishment of a US–ROK–Japan trilateral alliance—is a representative case. Announced on October 30, 2017, the main driver behind the South Korean government's three nos announcement was to persuade and restore relations with China. Once evaluated as China winning the THAAD turmoil "without firing a shot" (Volodzko, 2017), deterioration of ROK–China relations did have some influence, however limited, over South Korea's decision-making process on THAAD.

Shortly put, while China's coercive responses may have pushed South Korea to walk on eggshells between the US and China – some procedural and content changes in the process – China's coercion did not bring ultimate changes in South Korea's overall decision to deploy THAAD on USFK's Seongju base.

MORE THAAD SECURITY DEBATES IN SOUTH KOREA

Such continuity than change in South Korea's policy on THAAD can also be manifested through statements and rhetorics developed by Moon Jae-in government and policy communities.

Shifting of Moon Administration's Position Towards Threat-driven, Temporary Deployment

President Moon Jae-in's comments before and after his December 2017 state visit to China are especially notable. During a phone call with President Xi on May 11, 2017, President Moon empathized with China's "interest and concern over the deployment of THAAD" and called for mutual understanding in alleviating the difficulties faced by South Korean people and firms in China (Cheong Wa Dae, 2017a). However, subtle positional shifts were observable during President Moon's state visit to the United States in June 2017. During his meeting with the US Senate and House of Representatives, President Moon made the following statement about the THAAD issue: "It is an agreement based on the ROK-US alliance, to protect the lives of the Korean people and USFK, and the government should never treat it lightly because it was an agreement forged in the past administration." President Moon also indicated that his administration needed "more time" to implement a "democratic, procedural approach" to the issue in order to persuade the public (Cheong Wa Dae, 2017b).

After North Korea's ICBM launch in July 2017, however, President Moon ordered "immediate negotiation with the US on [the] additional deployment of remaining THAAD launchers" (NSC decision on July 29, 2017). The Moon administration's post-deployment rhetoric reflects a threat-driven shift for temporary deployment of THAAD.

After repeated ballistic missile launches, North Korea has also conducted its sixth nuclear test. This has made our security situation more severe than ever before. Accordingly, the government has come to the conclusion that the temporary deployment of THAAD can no longer be delayed to prevent war on the Korean Peninsula and protect the lives and safety of the people . . . The final deployment of the THAAD system will be decided after a more rigorous general environmental impact assessment, as [has been] promised several times. (Cheong Wa Dae, 2017c)

In October 2017, a joint statement from the forty-ninth ROK-US Security Consultative Meeting stated that both states have "assessed the alliance's decision" to deploy THAAD to "protect South Korean people and USFK from increasing North Korea's nuclear and missile threats." The statement also reconfirmed that the deployment is "temporary," pending the results of environmental impact studies.

President Moon Jae-in's comment after his state visit to China in December 2017 is particularly notable. He stated that it was like "finishing an imminent homework before the end of the year." Furthermore, in his chief cabinet meeting on November 20, 2017, President Moon stressed the importance of "reducing our dependence on the Chinese economy and preparing for the post-China era" (Cheong Wa Dae, 2017, p. 67), a point that the president stressed again during the fifty-fourth cabinet meeting (Cheong Wa Dae, 2017, p. 69). While the notion of diversification and the strategic burden of balancing between China and the United States are certainly not new in South Korea's strategic debates, the subtle change in the tone of President Moon's addresses to China reveals a less affirmative view of China. China's coercive measures seem to have sidelined the previous "romantic view of China" (Friedman, 2019). Venturing further, the ROK-

US joint statement (May 2021) quite evidently reflects Moon Jae-in government's shift away from China and back to the US side. Not only did the two leaders agree on "the importance of preserving peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait," they also pledged to "maintain [...] respect for international law, including freedom of navigation and overflight in the South China Sea and beyond." Without mentioning China, the two leaders also acknowledged "the importance of open, transparent, and inclusive regional multilateralism including the Quad."

Threat-Driven Sovereignty and Alliance-First Rhetoric in Policy Communities

Furthermore, the emergence of and return to threat-driven, alliance-first rhetoric on THAAD is observable in the National Assembly's National Defense Committee and other key policy communities. The 346th National Defense Committee Meeting held in September 2016 was characterized by concerns about the possible aggravation of ROK–China relations due to THAAD. People's Party member Kim Dong-chul, for instance, conveyed his concerns that ROK–China relations will turn hostile if THAAD deployment becomes a reality (ROK National Defense Committee, 2016a). Subsequently, in December 2016, during the 347th meeting, progressive party members argued that South Korea should not take any further steps regarding THAAD unless "we can convince China" (ROK National Defense Committee, 2016b).

However, given the mounting North Korean threat as of late 2016 to 2017, voices in favor of THAAD grew stronger within the National Defense Committee. Baek Seung-joo and other conservative party members on the committee called for a bolder approach to THAAD that prioritizes national security (ROK National Defense Committee, 2016b). During the meeting, Defense Minister Han Min-koo shared his "slightly different position" that the approach to THAAD should not revolve around "convincing China"; rather, it should be viewed as an independent endeavor for South Korea for the "sake of our security" and to "strengthen [our] security posture with the ally." Kim Hak-yong, another conservative party member on the committee, argued that "Given enough damage already from China, South Korea should deploy THAAD quickly" (ROK National Defense Committee, 2016b). By February 2017, the committee's conservative party members stated that "THAAD deployment has become an inevitable choice" for the government (ROK National Defense Committee, 2017).

Hardening of "Alliance-First" Security Rhetoric in Epistemic Communities

Lastly, as the hub of discussion among key policymakers, opinion leaders, and experts, the KPF and the GMKP's ideas also provide empirical evidence of how policy views and rhetoric have transitioned toward support for THAAD deployment in South Korea. To briefly elaborate, the KPF was established in 2009 under a conservative government headed by President Lee Myung-bak (2008–2013). Inclusive of civilian activists, professors, journalists, lawyers, military, and former high-level government officials from the past progressive regimes, key KPF members engineered many of the ideas that challenged the conservative government's views, including the issue of the missile defense system. In the form of conferences, media, joint statements, and signature-

seeking campaigns, as well as KPF members' news contributions, the opinions of the KPF encompass counterarguments and alternative policy agendas that diverge from the ten year span of conservative Lee Myung-bak and Park Geun-hye administration (2013–2017). Serving as the platform for progressives' policy agenda and human resources, their perceptions and policy proposals were implemented as of the inauguration of the progressive Moon Jae-in administration in May 2017, as many KPF members assumed both high- and low-level positions within the government and major think-tanks. Established in 2016, the GMKP is the conservative version of the KPF. The GMKP's members comprise former high-level government officials associated with previous conservative regimes, as well as professors, researchers, journalists, and military. Under the progressive Moon Jae-in administration, GMKP members played a critical role in generating ideas and policy alternatives that challenge the government's views. Taking KPF and GMKP as the key samples for analysis, this study has identified two major changes in strategic debates after the THAAD turmoil.

Firstly, a strong counterargument to maintaining strategic ambiguity or “balanced diplomacy” (Kim, 2016b, p. 26) between the United States and China emerged from the conservative GMKP. The major rationale is that the ROK–US alliance should be prioritized ahead of strategic cooperative relations with China (Shin, 2018) and that South Korea's “choice,” per se, between the United States and China was “already made” when the ROK and the United States signed the ROK–US Mutual Defense Treaty in 1953 (Kim, 2020). Regarding prioritizing the ROK–US alliance to ROK–China relations, members of the GMKP have stressed that “US and China should not be a matter of choice” (Park, 2021) and that this position needs to be clearly conveyed to China (Kim, 2020, pp. 14–15).

What we need to make clear is that in a military confrontation between the two Koreas, South Korea chose the US and China cannot replace it. There is a need to clearly convey our firm commitment to the ROK–US alliance to China (Park, 2021).

Just as we have two arms, we can be either right-handed or left-handed . . . but this does not mean that [a] right-handed [person] doesn't need the[ir] left arm . . . We should prepare to use both arms, but I think the central arm should be the ROK–US alliance. (Kim, 2020, pp. 14–15)

Hence, members of the GMKP have encouraged the South Korean government to assume a more competitive, resolute posture when dealing with China. Shin Kak-soo (2018) argued that in response to China's coercive diplomacy, the South Korean government should clearly demonstrate that South Korea will not easily yield to the major powers' unjustified wielding of power. Situating the THAAD incident as an exemplary case of China's power politics (Shin, 2020), it has been suggested that South Korea bring the issue to the World Trade Organization (WTO; Shin, 2018). Subsequently, in 2019, Shin (2019) leveled the criticism that the government was mistaken to have not dealt with the issue via the WTO. During a public lecture, GMPK President Yun Duk-min (2018) called for protest against the Chinese government's “subordinate” treatment. Invoking the negative connotations of the “Sinosphere” (Yun, 2020), THAAD retaliation has been portrayed as baring the “naked face” or the true

nature of China.

At the ROK–US summit in May 2021, as noted earlier, the ROK and US governments issued a joint statement that implied South Korea’s support for the majority of US policy targeting China. Although the joint statement did not explicitly mention China, the statement included agreement on military cooperation among the ROK, the United States, and Japan, the possible harmonization of the ROK’s New Southern Policy with the United States’ Indo-Pacific strategy, and references to the Taiwan Strait and South China Sea, which constitute the geopolitical frontline of the ongoing US–China strategic competition. Reaching possibly the best agreement on China-related issues, according to the *Global Times*, members of the GMPK re-emphasized that “Should China again decide to retaliate against the outcome of the ROK-US summit, we must respond decisively, and the US will not be complacent either” (*Maeil Business News Korea*, 2021). In other words, the rhetoric forged after the THAAD turmoil continues to have repercussions for the current strategic debates involving China and the United States. China’s coercive responses have, in this vein, become the fuel for the conservatives’ recognition of the imminence of “mak[ing] sides” between the two major powers and also perceiving “less[er] space to put ambiguity ahead” (*DongA Ilbo*, 2020). GMPK member Kim Hong-kyun declared that “The tightrope diplomacy between the US and China is over” (*The Chosun Ilbo*, 2021a). China’s coercive responses to THAAD deployment have caused the “hardening” of South Korea’s alliance-first security choices among the conservatives.

Second, the discursive commitment to “balanced diplomacy” seems to have waned over time in the progressive camp. When the Moon Jae-in administration took office in May 2017, the previous conservative government led by Park Geun-hye had already formally announced the decision to deploy THAAD and installed two THAAD launchers in Seongju on April 26, 2017. THAAD was therefore a pressing security and foreign policy issue for the new Moon government, not just in the context of ROK–China relations but more so regarding taking steps toward inter-Korean peace. Regarding enticing North Korea back to the dialogue, the Moon administration perceived THAAD as a major obstacle that could itself invigorate North Korea to engage in an arms race instead of dialogue, while also deterring China from encouraging North Korea to return to the negotiating table. Against this backdrop, one of the main arguments forwarded by KPF members was that THAAD deployment would only trigger an arms race and the revival of the Cold War in the Northeast Asian region, making achieving inter-Korean peace—one of the government’s top priorities—difficult, if not impossible.

Specifically, KPF members have voiced two policy directions. First, they continued to foster the idea of balanced diplomacy between the United States and China. Calling China South Korea’s “new reality,” Moon Chung-in (2020), Kim Joon-hyung (2020, 2021), and others have argued that the government’s goal should be to occupy a strategic position between the United States and China that is in the best interest of the economy and security of the people (*JoongAng Ilbo*, 2020). Consequently, the idea of a “flexible alliance” has emerged, acknowledging that while the ROK–US alliance is undeniably the backbone of South Korea’s security, we should not abandon the opportunity that China offers, and instead of viewing the alliance as “sacrosanct,” it should be seen as the means

to execute South Korea's strategic choices (Segye, 2019). Furthermore, Moon Chung-in's 2017 assertion that "The ROK-US alliance is not an alliance if it is to break because of THAAD" emphasized the importance of South Korea's bargaining with the US side as well (*Yonhap News*, 2017a). Furthermore, since South Korea is also an important and strategic ally for the United States, the United States will not withdraw its troops or weaken its commitment to "punish" South Korea: "No THAAD does not mean [the] end of the alliance" (*Yonhap News*, 2017a). KPF members also raised the issue of the credibility of the ROK-US alliance: If China retaliates militarily, will the US be able to protect South Korea? (*DongA Ilbo*, 2020)

Second, against this backdrop, members of the KPF suggested "delaying" THAAD operation. During a joint seminar hosted by the East Asia Foundation and the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington, DC, in June 2017, Moon Chung-in explained the inevitability of a delay in THAAD operation because of the environmental assessment that must be completed prior. Moon Chung-in stated that South Korea would need at least one year to complete the assessment, as it would be necessary to observe the impact under different weather conditions. Calling the environmental assessment "indispensable," Moon emphasized that it would be beyond the authority of both the USFK and the president to bypass the process, as neither is "above the law."

However, when North Korea conducted its sixth nuclear test on September 3, 2017, President Moon deployed four additional THAAD launchers in the same month. Defending against criticism from within and outside of the KPF, Moon Chung-in stated that "[Because the deployment of THAAD] was decided by the last government, we have no choice but to accept it," especially because "The US will withdraw the USFK if we do not deploy THAAD" (*OhmynewsTV*, 2017). While Moon Chung-in's personal position has not changed—that THAAD deployment will bring South Korea to the frontlines of US-China rivalry (*Yonhap News*, 2020)—the government's ultimate decision to deploy THAAD has induced changes in KPF members' official remarks. Subtle modifications include calling for "balance" regarding China as well. Aside from making the alliance more "flexible" and "balanced" between the United States and China, KPF members have also urged South Korea to use its leverage in its dealings with China. Kim Joon-hyung stressed the importance of building multilateral cooperation with other US allies or semi-allies that are also "stuck" between the United States and China (*Aju Business News*, 2020).

Last but not the least, there has also been an overall negative attitudinal change in public opinion regarding China. Major headlines and analytical perspectives on the THAAD issue in South Korea include "Damages by THAAD retaliation" (*Yonhap News*, 2017b), "China's intervention in South Korea's security choices" (*JoongAng Ilbo*, 2021), "Way too excessive" (*Hankyoreh*, 2017), "Still not over" (*Business Plus*, 2021), "21 trillion reduction in South Korea's income from tourism due to China's retaliation" (*Sedaily*, 2020), and "Slapped on the face" (*The Chosun Ilbo*, 2019). Moreover, in 2019, the Chicago Council on Global Affairs indicated that about fourteen percent of South Koreans perceived China as a reliable partner, compared to thirty-three percent in a 2016 poll conducted before THAAD (Friedhoff *et al.*, 2019). Another poll, conducted by the Asan Institute for Policy Studies (Kim, 2018), shows that Xi's favorability rating was

at its lowest—3.01 out of 5.0—in March 2017. About seventy percent of South Korean respondents said that China would not help to resolve the inter-Korean dispute and believed that China would take North Korea's side in case of contingency.

CONCLUSION

The main findings of this paper suggest that China's coercion has caused a tightening than "loosening" of the security linchpin of the ROK-US alliance. Post-THAAD changes in South Korea show that China's coercion has had a limited influence on reversing South Korea's THAAD decision. While South Korea faltered in the face of strong opposition from China as well as from within its own domestic sphere, leading to "temporary" and "slower" deployment, the ultimate decision to deploy THAAD remains in effect to date.

Regarding key agents' rhetoric, perceptions, and attitude toward China, it is evident that the romantic view of China has evaporated on both the conservative and progressive sides of the debate. Instead of the notion of balanced diplomacy that seemed to emphasize strategic cooperative relations with China, the conservatives re-emphasized the ROK-US alliance as "taking precedence over" ROK-China relations. Given that alliance and strategic partnership are bound to differ proportionally, the conservative agents emphasized that because China cannot replace the United States, South Korea's choice between the United States and China should no longer be an issue for debate. On the progressives' side, subtle changes can be observed such as the waning of positive attitudes toward China and emphasis on the need to prepare for a post-China era and reduce South Korea's dependence on China, while also seeking multilateral solidarity with other US allies or semi-allies to overcome China's coercive use of power in the future.

Prior to the THAAD turmoil, South Korea was, as Victor Cha (2019) phrased it, the "most complex and nuanced" US ally. Given that China is South Korea's "behemoth neighbor" that spends about six times more on its defense budget, has an economy that is nine times larger, has been South Korea's largest trading partner since 2003, and is also a key player in resolving the inter-Korean conflict, South Korea has always been slow to opposing China and choosing a side between the United States and China. Though this conclusion may be premature, the findings of this study suggest that China's coercion can make South Korea a less nuanced US ally, cause the hardening of South Korea's distrust, and overall, reinforce than loosen the ROK-US alliance.

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