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5 on 45:  
On the missile crisis in East Asia

Tuesday, March 7, 2017

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PITA: You're listening to 5 on 45 from the Brookings Podcast Network: analysis and commentary by Brookings experts on today's news regarding the Trump administration.

POLLACK: I'm Jonathan Pollack, senior fellow at Brookings and Interim SK-Korea Foundation Chair in Korea Studies in the Center for East Asia Policy Studies. Today brings the news of the initial deployment of the so-called THAAD system, to be deployed by U.S. forces in Korea. THAAD is a missile defense system. It is intended to be in the so-called Terminal High-Altitude Area Defense mode. It does not protect all of South Korea by any means. It is a form of protection against any kind of an incoming missile that would be directed from North Korea. It's generated a great deal of controversy, particularly on the part of the Chinese, who believe, I think wrongly, that there are enormous implications for the viability of their own nuclear deterrent as a function of the long-range radars that are used for a THAAD system. As to its effectiveness, we'll have to see. It has never been used in a formal combat role. It is intended, obviously, in part for assurance to South Korea, which is under the threat of ballistic missile attack from North Korea. But these steps have also generated a lot of political controversy in Seoul and elsewhere in Korea, simply because it puts new assets on the ground that leave some in South Korea uneasy about the potential implications.

But the bottom line is this: the bottom line is that North Korea has tested over the last year or more, more than two dozen ballistic missiles, many of them with the express intent to hit targets in South Korea, whether those are targets related to the U.S. military presence or related to South Korean defense preparations. And from the point of view

of many in South Korea, and for understandable reasons, their government is under pressure to respond in appropriate ways to the prospect or the possibility of an actual missile attack. So this provides, for many, assurance. It does so, I might add, with the United States incurring the costs related to the deployment of the THAAD system. It's not a perfect system. Missile defense does not work seamlessly, but it is an added layer against an increasingly diverse and increasingly numerous missile threat coming from North Korea that could, in a crisis, be directed against the South. More than this, it is intended to caution North Korea that it does incur any particular advantage to the possession of such weapons, that South Korea will not be intimidated. At the same time, the United States will reaffirm its commitments to the defense of South Korea, something that President Trump even did yesterday in a phone call with the acting Korean president. So there's a lot of anxiety that gets triggered here, a lot of media speculation, but my own view would be it is a prudent and appropriate step to take in the face of an ever-increasing North Korean missile threat, coming from a variety of systems that North Korea increasingly deploys.

As for China, the Chinese are in effect taking retribution against South Korea, making life more difficult for Lotte, the major South Korean firm that is yielding ground on a golf course that it owned for purposes of this missile deployment. But I think that this is a case of misplaced anxiety on China's part as it sees and evaluates, in very worst-case terms, the implications of the missile deployment. The real source here, and this is something the Chinese have yet to fully acknowledge, is in fact the growing capacities of North Korea, which are a threat to both China, but especially to the Republic of Korea, and that's what has to be addressed above all.

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