

Policy Forum 01-03A: South Korea and NMD



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By Peter M. Beck

CONTENTS

[I. Introduction](#)

[II. Essay by Peter M. Beck](#)

[III. Nautilus Invites Your Responses](#)

I. Introduction

This essay is by Peter M. Beck, Director of Research and Academic Affairs at the Korea Economic Institute of America, and was originally published in the ROK daily Hankyoreh Shinmun on March 16. This is the first in a series on the debate over missile defense in Asia.

Beck states that US President George Bush, while he is spending tens of billions of dollars on a missile program that does not work, is also calling for a massive tax cut that will lead to cuts in social welfare and infrastructure spending. Beck argues that NMD would only alienate America's allies and encourage China and Russia to devote more resources to defense and push them to become enemies of the United States. He concludes that NMD represents a huge mistake for the US and the Korean Peninsula, and South Korea must help the Bush team reject NMD.

II. Essay by Peter M. Beck

Ever since President Kim Dae-jung signed the joint communiqué with Russian President Vladimir Putin suggesting that the South opposed the Bush Administration's proposal for a national missile defense (NMD), South Korean authorities have been scrambling to reassure their American counterparts that Seoul supports NMD.

However, unlike British Prime Minister Tony Blair, who unexpectedly received Bush's support for a European rapid-reaction force in exchange for lending his support for NMD when the two met for the first time last month, President Kim's loyalty was rewarded by being informed that the Bush team intended to get tough with North Korea, potentially undermining Kim's three-year struggle to engage the North. President Kim would be forgiven if he walked away from his first meeting with Bush thinking, "With friends like this, who needs enemies?" This foreign policy setback may actually provide an opportunity for South Korea to fully consider whether NMD (and its younger brother TMD) would promote peace or raise tensions on the Korean Peninsula.

The Folly of NMD:

The Bush people seem oblivious to the inconvenient fact that not only is NMD technologically unfeasible and prohibitively expensive, it would also unleash a global arms race without enhancing America's national security. At the same time, pursuing NMD will make rapprochement with North Korea even more difficult and raise tensions on the Korean Peninsula.

NMD does not work:

No less an authority than the former head of the Pentagon's top think tank, Jack Ruina (currently a professor of electrical engineering at MIT), recently wrote in the Washington Post, "Bush seems oblivious to NMD's many problems: its inherent technical inadequacies, its high cost and the fact that it is hardly ready even for construction to begin." The current system being proposed has failed even the most controlled tests set up by the military. Given that American intelligence cannot tell the difference between a hole in the ground (Keumchang-ri) and an illicit military facility, it is not clear that they would even know where to aim. Even if it could ever be made to block out conventional missiles, NMD would do nothing to protect the United States from an unconventional attack via ship or even a moving van. The nickname given to the NMD initiative in the early 1980s--"Star Wars"--still applies today because the whole project remains science fiction.

Guns or Butter?:

At a time when President Bush is calling for a massive tax cut, spending tens of billions of dollars on a missile program that does not work would invariably lead to cuts in social welfare and infrastructure spending. The president needs to look no further than the homeless people lining up for food in the squares near his new home or the antiquated subway that passes near his home, but does not reach many communities, to find more worthy programs. Over the past 50 years, America

has spent over \$100 billion on developing a national missile defense. The Congressional Budget Office estimates that the current system would cost \$60 billion, but to implement a missile defense system that actually worked could easily cost double that amount. An NMD program would only enrich defense contractors and confirm that the "military-industrial complex" is alive and well.

Diplomatic Nightmare:

Bush's foreign policy team seems trapped in a Cold War mentality. Vice President Cheney and Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld act as if they are still serving their former boss, President Ford. America is the lone superpower-unchallenged militarily. The nature of the military threat facing the United States in the 21st century has changed. Instead of defending against conventional threats, the United States must be prepared for unconventional terrorist attacks. NMD would fail at the former and ignore the latter. NMD would only alienate America's allies and encourage China and Russia to devote more resources to defense and push them to become enemies of the United States.

Missile Defense and the Korean Peninsula:

If NMD is wrong for America, NMD and TMD are even more wrong for the Korean Peninsula. Even if South Korea were not asked to contribute to the building or hosting of such a system, the resulting arms spiral in Asia would force the government to spend even more precious resources on national defense. Neither NMD nor TMD would help defend South Korea from North Korea's short range missiles-the primary threat facing the South today. Moreover, given that North Korea is usually cited as one of the primary reasons for building a missile defense system, tensions on the peninsula would invariably rise.

On the eve of the Bush-Kim summit, the Clinton Administration's point person for North Korea, Wendy Sherman, told a gathering of Korea watchers in Washington that engaging North Korea and pursuing NMD were mutually compatible. But to claim that North Korea would simply ignore a multi-billion dollar missile system directed against it is at best naive and at worst disingenuous. Pursuit of NMD will only make negotiations with North Korea more difficult and raise tensions on the Peninsula while at the same time failing to provide even a modicum of added security for the South Korean people.

The era of sadaejueui has long passed. South Korea and the United States are increasingly equal partners, with a friendship forged in the blood of the Korean War. A true friend has a responsibility to candidly say when a friend is making a mistake. NMD represents a huge mistake for the United States and the Korean Peninsula. Koreans would do well not to lose their voices at such a critical time. South Korea must help the Bush team come to its senses and reject NMD. The sooner this happens, but better off the Korean Peninsula (not to mention the world) will be.

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III. Nautilus Invites Your Responses

The Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network invites your responses to this essay. Please send responses to: napsnet-reply@nautilus.org . Responses will be considered for redistribution to the network only if they include the author's name, affiliation, and explicit consent.

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[Return to top](#)

[back to top](#)

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