

Seongju (South Korea): Farmers fight planned US missile base

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Despite the rain, hundreds of people turned out in Seongju County on September 4 for a candlelight vigil for the 54th night in a row. Their message is clear: no to the United States' planned deployment of the THAAD missile defence system, not in Seongju or anywhere in South Korea.

Seongju, a small town of mainly melon farmers, today finds itself at the forefront of a struggle against a new proposed US military deployment in the region. It is a deployment some warn could rekindle the Cold War.

THAAD, or Terminal High Altitude Area Defence, uses radar technology and missile interceptors to shoot down ballistic missiles. Its proposed deployment in South Korea is considered an important plank of US military strategy in the region.

The US has stated that the deployment is a defensive response to North Korea's nuclear program. After a nuclear test by North Korea on September 9, US President Barack Obama said the test was further evidence of the "grave threat" the country posed to regional and international security. He vowed to push ahead with the THAAD deployment.

The Mutual Defence Treaty, signed by the two countries in 1953 after the Korean War, enables its deployment in South Korea. The treaty gives the US the right, in consultation with the South Korean government, to deploy armed forces on South Korean soil.

So far, details of the agreement to facilitate the THAAD deployment have not been made public and the South Korean government has stated it does not intend to seek approval from parliament.

THAAD has been strongly objected to not only by North Korea, but China and Russia. Dae-Hang Song, from the Seoul-based International Strategy Centre, said these countries have legitimate reasons to be concerned.

"When you look at a map and see where Seongju is, you can understand why China would be concerned," said Song. He pointed out that the current proposed location for deployment would easily allow the THAAD radar system — which can reach up to 3000 kilometres away — to extend into Chinese territory.

At the same time, it is doubtful that THAAD would be able to protect Seoul were North Korea to fire missiles. "THAAD is mainly used to protect against missiles launched at high altitude," said Song, "but if any attack were to occur it would most likely involve low-altitude missiles given Seoul's location. This essentially makes THAAD irrelevant in terms of protecting Korean lives."

The THAAD deployment is facing important resistance within South Korea. The day after Seongju was announced as the preferred site for the THAAD deployment on July 13, 44 civic society and religious groups issued a statement saying: "The deployment of THAAD should be repealed because it threatens peace in East Asia and infringes on people's right to a peaceful life."

That same day, residents of Seongju held their first candlelight vigil in opposition to the deployment outside the offices of the local county authorities. They were still there when Prime Minister Hwang Kyo-Ahn came to town. About 3000 people surrounded the prime minister's bus, demanding he reversed his decision. And they have been back every night since.

In the process, residents and local authorities have established the Struggle Committee against THAAD. Lee Jae-dong, president of the Seongju peasant's association and a leader of the Struggle Committee, said the candlelight vigils have been critical to both organising and educating people about THAAD.

"We hope that through these vigils we can convince people of why they should oppose THAAD," Jae-dong said "Every day we get between 500 to 2000 people at the vigils, and we have organised three larger rallies that have mobilised up to 8000 people."

This is an impressive number given the county's population is about 50,000. Jae-dong explained that the area is a traditional stronghold of the governing Conservative Party, although he added that more than 1000 local members of the ruling party had resigned over THAAD.

A permanent protest camp has also been established in front of the offices of the local authorities.

Jae-dong said the vigils, as well as being "joyful activities in which the community can participate", have become "an important opportunity to discuss politics and the development of the campaign."

This has been critical for addressing a number of difficult issues the campaign has already had to deal with.

Despite being aligned with the Conservative Party, county authorities were quick to get on board the campaign against THAAD. However, Chul-Ju Park, another local melon farmer and activist with the Struggle Committee, said their attitude started to change by mid-August.

"County authorities helped initiate the protests, but it is evident they did so with the intention of using the protests as a negotiating chip to cut a deal later on," said Park.

The authorities, explained Park, have been pushing within the Struggle Committee to limit the focus of the struggle to the potential health impacts of the radiation emitted by the THAAD radar.

By doing so, they hope to leave the door open to being about to negotiate and accept an alternate site for THAAD, one located further way from residential areas. The national government has already flagged two other potential sites apart from Seongju.

Though initially opposition to the THAAD deployment was largely fuelled by concerns over the health effects, through discussions at the vigil many now see the broader issues as to why THAAD should be opposed anywhere.

Local farmer Ryu DongIn said, "this has to do with our livelihood. Even if they move it further away from the town, the name Seongju will become associated with THAAD, just like the names of certain towns are associated with nearby nuclear power plants. This will have a big impact on our local economy where we produce over 70% of South Korea's melons."

DongIn also referred to the problems this could cause in terms of trade with China — the destination of more than a quarter of South Korea's exports. China has already raised the prospect of sanctions. "And of course, there is the issue that this could trigger a war [on the Korean Peninsula]" added DongIn.

“Our goal is to make THAAD a national issue,” said Park. “That is why through the discussions at the vigils, the campaign has shifted from being against THAAD in Seongju to being against THAAD anywhere on the Korean Peninsula.”

Dae-jong said they have also sought to expand the struggle to other cities. More than 50 towns and cities held candlelight vigils on the 50th day of protest, and daily vigils have begun in other nearby counties. Plans are also underway to have more than 100 protests around South Korea to coincide with the 100th vigil in Seongju on October 20.

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P.S.

* GreenLeft. hursday, September 15, 2016:

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