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The Issue: After threatening the United States and South Korea during their annual joint ground, air, naval and special operations military exercise called “Foal Eagle 2017,” North Korea conducted its latest ballistic missile test on March 5 with three of the four projectiles falling into the sea not far from the shores of Japan. Pyongyang’s actions have yet again increased tension on the Korean peninsula and have intensified U.S. commitment to South Korea’s defense—the U.S. just deployed the THAAD system in the country.

The background: South Korea is one of America’s closest allies in East Asia. The two country’s bilateral defense cooperation goes back to the aftermath of the Korean War. Shortly after the armistice agreement between North Korea and South Korea in 1953, Seoul and Washington signed a Mutual Defense Treaty. Calling for both parties to help one another in case either of them were attacked by a third country, the treaty has been the cornerstone of the alliance between South Korea and the United States. The two nations have carried out bilateral military cooperation in the areas of the deployment of South Korean troops in Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan to help U.S. efforts in those countries and the deployment of American troops in South Korea to assure the country’s defense. There is also a sizeable American military presence in the Northeast Asian country, where nearly 28,500 U.S. soldiers are stationed and where the U.S. military conducts regular exercises with its Korean counterpart. Seeing this as a provocation, North Korea has made several threats in the last years ranging from verbal bullying (such as threats of preemptive strikes against targets in South Korea and the United States) to distressing actions (such as nuclear and ballistic missile tests) condemned by the international community. In response to these threats, and in order to defend its allies—as well as American and allied troops and citizens—in the region, the United States raised the possibility of deploying components of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system. The purpose of THAAD is to detect incoming short and medium range ballistic missiles and to intercept them at high altitude with missiles utilizing kinetic energy. It is a transportable defense system that destroys ballistic missiles not with other warheads but rather through the sheer power of the impact of its interceptors—a safer method. The idea of THAAD deployment was announced in July 2016, and has gained momentum following North Korea’s latest provocative actions.

The American defense of South Korea and of other U.S. allies in the region is one of the first tests of the Trump Administration, especially since Donald Trump openly criticized East Asian countries’ supposedly insufficient contributions to defense during the 2016 presidential campaign. Specifically, he complained that while “South Korea is a money machine, they pay us peanuts” for deploying U.S. troops there, and called for an increase in the hosts’ financial contributions. In all fairness, this claim was unfounded, as the Northeast Asian country has been

paying more than \$800 million annually according to a bilateral Special Measures Agreement signed in 2014. This figure accounts for nearly half of the total non-personnel costs of U.S. troop deployments, however, this is also supplemented by South Korea's share of \$9.74 billion for the relocation and construction of several U.S. bases on its territory. Still, Trump's campaign remarks caused nervousness in Seoul, which was looking for re-assurance from Washington much like U.S. allies in Europe hope for protection against Russia. Both President Trump and Secretary of Defense (Ret. Gen.) James Mattis at least confirmed America's commitment to protecting its allies in 2017. Regarding THAAD, the Trump Administration's decision to begin deployment in South Korea via U.S. Pacific Command was not surprising. Firstly, the move would have been probably made anyway, as the already mentioned announcement of July 2016 proposed a deadline of deployment in late 2017. Secondly, as Secretary Mattis stated in early February 2017, "were it not for the provocative behavior of North Korea, we would have no need for THAAD out here." In other words, while THAAD was already deployed in Guam, its presence in South Korea is exclusively linked to North Korea's hostile activities. In just its first few weeks in office, the Trump Administration has already pledged to deal "very strongly" with North Korea's nuclear and ballistic missile program. Overall, President Trump showed that he has overcome his own campaign remarks and has made decisive efforts to reassure U.S. allies on East Asia both through words and actions, although neither of the two represent drastic changes in terms of enhancing U.S. defense commitment.

What is perhaps more interesting is the way in which the Trump Administration will deal with the additional consequences of this reassurance. Preparing for the interception of North Korean missiles is in the national security interest of the United States. However, the THAAD deployment is a step that has been repeatedly criticized by China: the country that has been the main supporter of the Kim regime in North Korea since the 1950s for geopolitical reasons. Officially, Beijing opposes the deployment because it would upset the already fragile system of regional security by increasing the possibility of Pyongyang feeling cornered and becoming more aggressive. More importantly however, despite the fact that THAAD specifically focuses on North Korea, China is wary that the system's X-Band radar would also detect military assets in certain parts of China, decreasing the latter's deterrent capabilities. Thus Washington faces a situation on the Korean peninsula similar to that in Central and Eastern Europe, where Russia has opposed the U.S.-constructed missile shield which it regards as a possible threat against its nuclear deterrent, even though the system is a limited assurance against ballistic missile attacks originating from outside the Euro-Atlantic area. The hitherto unresolved issue has been a source of unease in U.S.-Russian relations well before the crisis in Ukraine. A similar problem may occur with China, which regards the United States' countermeasures as adversarial. The region was placed in the spotlight by the Obama Administration's "pivot/rebalance" and was expected to receive less attention by President Trump whose initial acts included the withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership. While the Trump Administration seems unpredictable in various foreign policy areas, it has displayed a straightforward position on Iran, North Korea and their respective nuclear and ballistic missile programs. An increasingly provocative Pyongyang has inevitably attracted greater American attention to the region, and will most likely force the Trump White House to keep the "pivot/rebalance" on Washington's foreign policy agenda.