THAAD Missile Defense in South Korea
Providing Protection from North Korea

What

Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) batteries are an advanced missile defense system developed by the United States. The system is designed to intercept incoming medium range ballistic missiles (MRBM) during their terminal phase.

Why

North Korea continues to develop its renegade nuclear program and conduct missile tests despite international condemnation. South Korea has been a long standing ally of the United States, and THAAD provides protection for South Korea from a possible missile assault from North Korea.

How

1) Radar detects incoming threat
2) The target is identified and engaged
3) Interceptor is fired from truck-mounted launcher
4) Interceptor uses kinetic energy to destroy incoming missile

When

At the request of South Korea, the U.S. started the process of deploying THAAD on March 6, 2017, at Osan Air Base in Pyeongtaek, South Korea. Provocative actions conducted by North Korea, including two nuclear tests in the past year and two rounds of missile tests in 2017, have prompted officials in both nations to speed up the deployment process, which may be completed as soon as this year.

2014

June 8
U.S. Forces Korea commander Gen. Curtis Scaparrotti states the U.S. is considering THAAD deployment in South Korea

2015

May 21
South Korean defense ministry states that Seoul would join consultations on possible deployment at the U.S.’s request

2016

February 7
South Korea announces the start of formal consultations for THAAD deployment

2017

March 6
The first of five components of the missile system arrives in South Korea

July 8
South Korean and U.S. officials announce the decision to deploy THAAD in South Korea

Expected 2017

Officials have indicated that full deployment could occur within one or two months

Source: Heritage Foundation, Lockheed Martin, Yonhap News
Image Credit: U.S. Missile Defense Agency
KEI is registered under the Foreign Agents Registration Act as an agent of the Korea Institute for International Economic Policy, a public corporation established by the Government of the Republic of Korea.

The deployment site for THAAD is in Seongju County, located 184 miles south of South Korea’s capital Seoul. The 125 mile missile range can only intercept medium range missiles in South Korea’s airspace and not intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBM).

China has responded negatively to THAAD deployment in South Korea on the grounds that the radar range violates Chinese territory. Russia objects as well. The U.S. and South Korea have dismissed these claims because of THAAD’s purely defensive capabilities.

THAAD uses kinetic energy to intercept and destroy incoming missiles during their downward phase. THAAD is ineffective against ICBMs in their launch stage and the missiles do not carry their own warheads.

North Korean Threat

5 nuclear tests from 2006 to 2016, with two conducted in 2016

28 missile tests in 2016, which is a record high number of missile tests for North Korea in a year

5 sub-launched ballistic missile (SLBM) tests in 2015 and 2016

1,500 kilometer range of North Korea’s medium range ballistic No-dong missile.

2 times the number of missile tests under current North Korean leader Kim Jong Un than his predecessor and father Kim Jong Il

North Korea has also conducted missiles tests in March and February of 2017.

Source: Heritage Foundation, Lockheed Martin, CSIS, Korea Herald

KEI is registered under the Foreign Agents Registration Act as an agent of the Korea Institute for International Economic Policy, a public corporation established by the Government of the Republic of Korea.