



Dynamics of South Korea's Three No's Policy: Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) Deployment and China Relations Analysis

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ABSTRACT: This research analyzes the deployment of *Terminal High Altitude Area Defense* (THAAD) in South Korea's foreign policy and its impact on relations with China. The study examines why South Korea took a compromising approach through the *Three No's Policy* despite implementing the THAAD system as a deterrence against North Korea. Through James Rosenau's Foreign Policy Theory with five factors (*systemic, societal, governmental, idiosyncratic, and role sources*), this research fills a gap in literature on decision-making dynamics in East Asian security dilemmas. The study employs qualitative methods with case study analysis, relying on primary and secondary sources including policy documents, official government statements, and bilateral economic data. Results indicate that economic dependence on China and domestic pressure became dominant factors in South Korea's compromising decision, outweighing considerations of alliance with the United States. These findings imply that in an era of economic interdependence, even countries facing direct security threats may be forced to balance security interests with economic concerns.

Keywords: Foreign Policy, THAAD, Three No's Policy



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INTRODUCTION

South Korea's deployment of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system in July 2016 created an immediate security dilemma with China, forcing Seoul to adopt the Three No's Policy in October 2017 as a diplomatic compromise. This policy—containing commitments to no additional THAAD deployments, no participation in US missile defense systems, and no trilateral military alliance with US-Japan—represents a critical case of middle power navigation between security imperatives and economic dependencies in East Asian geopolitics ([Christensen et al., 2015](#)), North Korea's nuclear and ballistic missile programs establishing an uncertain security environment (O'Neil, 2013), and the United States' involvement in regional dynamics through its "Pivot to Asia" policy (Zhang, 2011). The intensification of North Korean threats, demonstrated by its 2016 nuclear test with a 10-20 kiloton yield equivalent to the Hiroshima bomb and the development of the Hwasong-15 ICBM capable of reaching the entire United States ([Missile Defense Advocacy Alliance, 2022](#)), compelled South Korea to deploy the Terminal High Altitude

Area Defense (THAAD) system in July 2016—an advanced missile defense system with a 100% success rate in 16 trials since 2005 ([Missile Defense Project, 2021](#)).

The central research problem examines why South Korea adopted a compromising approach through the Three No's Policy despite implementing THAAD as deterrence against North Korean threats. This study applies James Rosenau's Five-Variable Model (systemic, societal, governmental, idiosyncratic, and role sources) to analyze the multidimensional pressures shaping Seoul's strategic calculus. Unlike previous studies focusing on military technical analysis or bilateral relationship impacts, this research specifically examines the decision-making process behind the Three No's Policy using Rosenau's comprehensive framework, filling a gap in understanding how middle powers navigate security-economic trade-offs in great power competition contexts ([B. Lee, 2016](#)).

This research contributes to foreign policy analysis by demonstrating how Rosenau's multi-level framework explains contemporary security dilemmas where economic interdependence constrains traditional alliance solidarity. The findings reveal that economic dependence on China and domestic pressure became dominant factors in South Korea's decision, providing insights for other middle powers facing similar pressures between security partnerships and economic relationships in the evolving East Asian strategic landscape.

Several researchers have previously studied the deployment of Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) in South Korea and its implications for regional relations ([Ekmektsioglou & Lee, 2022](#); [Fahmi Akbar & Rustam, n.d.](#); [Gong, 2017](#); [Kanellopoulos, 2023](#); [Kim & Park, 2019](#); [Leofarhan & Azzqy, 2018](#); [Sankaran & Fearey, 2017](#)). These studies examine the security dynamics that emerged from the THAAD deployment as a response to North Korean threats. However, conceptually, they employ different approaches such as military technical analysis, bilateral relationship studies, regional security dilemma perspectives, and the economic impact of Chinese sanctions.

Although these studies have explored various dimensions of THAAD deployment, none have specifically analyzed South Korea's decision-making process in implementing the Three No's Policy as a compromise following THAAD deployment, particularly using James Rosenau's Foreign Policy Theory framework with its five approach factors. This research fills this gap by examining in depth why South Korea, as a middle power, took a compromising approach through the Three No's Policy despite implementing THAAD as a deterrence effort against North Korea.

METHOD

This research employs a qualitative methodology with a case study approach to analyze South Korea's foreign policy decision-making regarding THAAD deployment and the subsequent Three No's Policy implementation during 2016-2017. The research utilizes secondary data from academic journals, international relations theory books, official policy documents, government statements, think tank reports from the *Korean Economic Institute* and CSIS, ministerial publications, and bilateral economic data to evaluate China's retaliatory impact. Data collection is conducted through a

comprehensive literature review of published sources focusing on the critical period from the THAAD deployment decision (July 2016) through implementing the Three No's Policy (October 2017). The analytical framework employs a three-stage model with detailed application of Rosenau's framework. In the data reduction stage, each of Rosenau's five variables was operationalized as follows: systemic sources included US-China strategic competition dynamics and North Korean threat levels; societal sources encompassed public opinion polls, business community responses, and civil society reactions; governmental sources covered inter-agency coordination processes and bureaucratic decision-making patterns; idiosyncratic sources focused on President Moon Jae-in's leadership style and policy preferences; and role sources examined South Korea's dual position as US ally and China's economic partner.

Triangulation was conducted by cross-referencing South Korean government statements with Chinese official responses and neutral third-party analyses from CSIS and KEI reports. Peer debriefing involved consultation with East Asian security experts to validate the interpretation of policy decisions and theoretical application. However, this study acknowledges methodological limitations, including reliance on secondary sources, potential language barriers in the translation of Korean and Chinese documents, and limited access to classified decision-making materials, which may introduce interpretive bias in understanding the complete scope of internal government deliberations.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Foreign Policy

Foreign policy represents formulating a nation's political elite's thinking into agendas or programs that identify problems and are directed at actors outside domestic political influence, including international and regional organizations and other states ([Haesebrouck & Joly, 2021](#)). In an international relations perspective, foreign policy is defined as national interests selected and formulated into a consistent logical unity by policymakers, which is then applied to the international world ([Bindra, 2019](#)). From a conceptual standpoint, foreign policy encompasses a collection of values and actions implemented by policymakers to facilitate policy changes or address specific issues. These changes and issues may manifest as shifts in attitudes or behaviors from other nations or non-governmental entities, including NGOs, MNCs, TNCs, epistemic communities, and private individuals (Holsti, 1955).

In contemporary international relations dynamics, a nation's foreign policy often reflects the complexity of challenges faced in balancing security and economic interests. South Korea, positioned amid geopolitical competition between the United States and China while confronting threats from North Korea, presents a fascinating case study of security dilemmas and foreign policy adaptation strategies. The deployment of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system in 2017 and the subsequent decision to adopt the Three No's Policy toward China illustrate how South Korea attempted to balance its security interests with economic and diplomatic realities in the region. To understand the complexity of this decision-making process,

a comprehensive multi-level analysis is required, and this is where James Rosenau's Five-Variable Model offers a valuable theoretical framework.

Pre-Theory of Foreign Policy

Rosenau's Five-Variable Model provides a comprehensive analytical framework that is highly relevant for examining South Korea's foreign policy dynamics regarding THAAD deployment and its relationship with China.

Systemic Aggregation Continuum	Time Continuum	
	Sources that lend to change slowly	Sources that lend to undergo rapid change
Systemic Sources	Great power structure Alliances Size Geography	Situational factors: external issue areas Crisis
Societal Sources	Culture and History	Economic development Social structure Mood of opinion Political accountability Governmental structure
Governmental Sources		Situational factors: Internal
Idiosyncratic Sources		Values, experiences, personalities of leaders

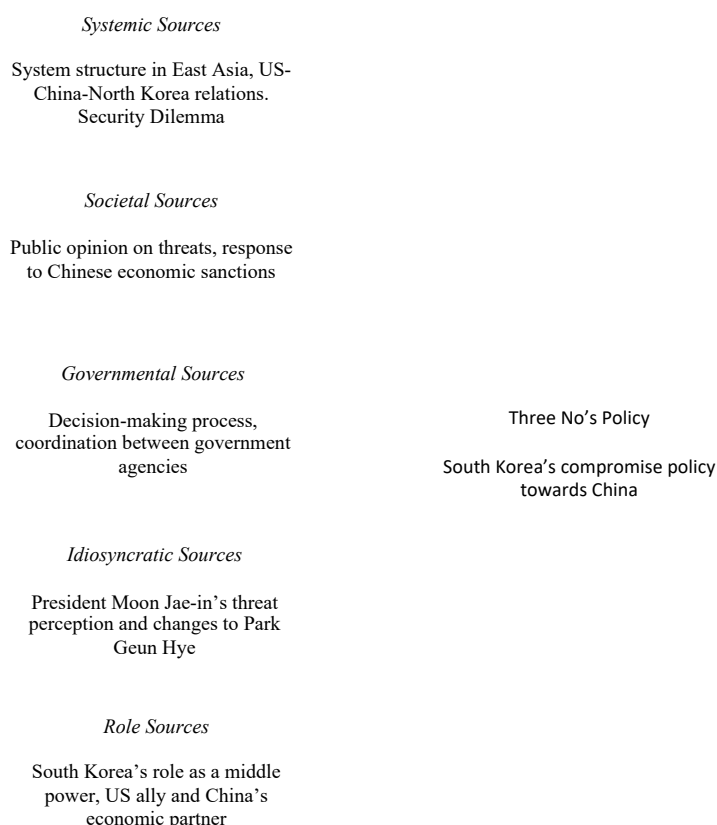
Source: (Rosenau, 1980)

This model classifies factors influencing foreign policy along two primary dimensions: the Systemic Aggregation Continuum, which divides sources of influence into five levels (*systemic, societal, governmental, idiosyncratic, and role*), and the Time Continuum, which differentiates factors based on their rate of change. Through this conceptual matrix, we can identify that South Korea's decision to adopt the Three No's Policy despite implementing the THAAD system was influenced by a complex interaction between the regional power structure in East Asia, alliance pressures from the United States, economic dependence on China, domestic political dynamics, and threat perceptions from North Korea.

Rosenau's pre-theoretical approach enables multi-level analysis that explains how South Korea attempted to balance security needs (deterrence against North Korea) with its economic and diplomatic interests regarding China. Slowly changing factors such as the US alliance, geography, and economic dependence on China interact with rapidly changing factors like security crises on the Korean Peninsula and political leadership dynamics, creating a classic security dilemma that drove Seoul to adopt a compromising approach through the Three No's Policy. This framework offers a holistic perspective that integrates various levels of analysis, from the international system to individual policymaker characteristics, thereby providing deeper insight into the complexity of

South Korea's foreign policy decision-making process within the context of regional tensions in East Asia.

Thus, a framework has been adjusted to the chosen theory. Five aspects are studied: systemic, societal, governmental, idiosyncratic, and role. After knowing the concerns, the result will be known.



Applying Rosenau's Five-Variable Model to the case of South Korea's Three No's Policy, this study identifies the key factors at each level of analysis that influenced Seoul's decision to adopt this compromise policy while retaining the THAAD system. What follows is an in-depth analysis of each of the variables that shaped South Korea's strategic response to the security dilemma it faced.

Systemic Sources

Systemic sources in the analysis of South Korea's Three No's Policy focus on the international system structure that forms the context for this policy. The system structure in East Asia reveals complex dynamics characterized by strategic competition between the United States and China, while North Korea is a regional instability factor. This trilateral relationship creates a challenging strategic environment for South Korea, which must balance its interests amid great power competition (Jung, 2018). South Korea's security alliance with the United States has been a central pillar of Seoul's defense strategy since the end of the Korean War. The presence of American

troops on the Korean Peninsula and the security shield provided by Washington offer vital security guarantees for Seoul. In this context, the decision to deploy the THAAD system represents a strengthening of this alliance in response to the increasing ballistic missile threat from North Korea, especially following a series of nuclear tests and long-range missile launches ([Sarah, 2016](#)).

Meanwhile, South Korea's economic relationship with China demonstrates significant dependence, with China being South Korea's largest trading partner. Bilateral trade volume, cross-border investments, and supply chain dependencies create a situation where South Korean actions perceived as detrimental to China's security interests can present substantial economic risks. Beijing clearly views the THAAD system as a threat to its strategic capabilities, claiming that the system's radar can monitor deep into Chinese territory ([Nikitin, 2013](#)). A classic security dilemma manifests when South Korea's efforts to enhance its security through THAAD deployment generate threat perceptions for China. South Korea's defensive actions are viewed as offensive steps by China, creating a spiral of insecurity that prompts China to take retaliatory measures through economic sanctions. This security dilemma phenomenon is a consequence of the anarchic structure of the international system where states must rely on themselves for their security ([Jervis, 1978](#)).

North Korea's unpredictable provocations further exacerbate regional structural tensions. North Korea's nuclear and ballistic missile programs, which continue despite international pressure, directly threaten South Korea's security. This existential threat drives Seoul to prioritize deterrence, with the THAAD system becoming an essential component in its layered defense strategy against potential attacks from North Korea ([Zhao, 2016](#)). The system structure in East Asia and the security dilemma faced by South Korea lead to the need to find a difficult balance between maintaining the security alliance with the United States and managing economic relations with China. The Three No's Policy emerges as a strategic response to these systemic pressures, reflecting Seoul's efforts to mitigate the negative consequences of the security dilemma through diplomatic assurances to Beijing while maintaining enhanced defense capabilities through the THAAD system ([Easley, 2017](#)).

Societal Sources

Societal sources in South Korea's foreign policy analysis framework focus on domestic factors influencing the government's decision-making process. South Korean public opinion regarding security threats from North Korea has been a significant support driver for the THAAD system deployment. A series of provocations from North Korea, including nuclear tests and ballistic missile launches, has created profound concerns among South Korean society about their country's vulnerability to potential attacks from their northern neighbor ([Cho & Lim, 2018](#)). When South Korea announced the decision to deploy the THAAD system in July 2016, China's harsh reaction in the form of economic sanctions had tangible impacts on various sectors of the South Korean economy. The tourism industry experienced a sharp decline when the Chinese government banned group tours to South Korea. South Korean companies operating in China, especially the Lotte conglomerate that provided land for THAAD deployment, faced strict regulatory scrutiny and even forced closure of some of their retail outlets in the Chinese market ([Trezza, 2018](#)).

South Korean society's response to economic pressure from China developed in complex ways. On one hand, there was nationalistic sentiment opposing what was perceived as economic coercion by China, with calls to boycott Chinese products and support for South Korean companies affected by sanctions. On the other hand, business groups and communities dependent on trade with China voiced their concerns about the long-term economic consequences of deteriorating relations with their largest trading partner, creating pressure for the government to seek a diplomatic solution ([Chunyan & Wansheng, 2017](#)). Public opinion dynamics were further complicated by political polarization in South Korea. Conservative supporters prioritized the US alliance and strong defense measures against North Korea, while progressives emphasized greater autonomy in security policy and improved relations with neighboring countries, including China. The transition from Park Geun Hye's conservative administration to Moon Jae-in's progressive government in May 2017 reflected a shift in public sentiment, directly impacting South Korea's foreign policy approach ([Oknim, 2018](#)).

The economic impact of Chinese sanctions caused significant changes in South Korean public perception toward relations with China. Before the THAAD crisis, many South Koreans viewed China's growth as an economic opportunity. However, China's use of economic coercion changed this view, with polls showing increased negative perceptions toward China. This created a complex domestic environment where the government had to consider national security and economic well-being in formulating policies related to THAAD and relations with China ([Lim, 2019](#)). These societal factors directly influenced the diplomatic approach the Moon Jae-in administration adopted. The Three No's Policy emerged as a compromise to ease tensions with China while maintaining the THAAD system in response to domestic security concerns. This policy reflects the South Korean government's need to balance diverse societal demands: meeting expectations for national security protection, restoring economic relations with China, and maintaining political legitimacy amid domestic polarization ([Yang, 2019](#)).

Governmental Sources

Governmental sources in South Korea's foreign policy analysis refer to the structures, processes, and dynamics within government institutions that influence the formulation of the Three No's Policy. South Korea's democratic political system requires complex coordination among various government agencies in the foreign policy decision-making. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Defense, the National Security Council, and the Presidential Office are key actors in formulating policies related to THAAD and relations with China, each bringing their own institutional perspectives and bureaucratic interests. The transition of power from the Park Geun-hye administration to the Moon Jae-in government in May 2017 marked a significant shift in the approach to the THAAD issue. The Park administration, strongly influenced by security and defense groups, prioritized strengthening the alliance with the United States and implementing the THAAD system in response to the North Korean threat. In contrast, the newly elected Moon administration brought a more balanced policy orientation, seeking to bridge security priorities with broader economic and diplomatic considerations ([KU, 2019](#)).

The decision-making process related to the Three No's Policy involved intensive negotiations between ministries with different perspectives. The Ministry of Defense emphasized the importance of maintaining the THAAD system for national security, while the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and economic teams were more concerned about the ongoing impact of Chinese sanctions on the South Korean economy. These bureaucratic dynamics created a complex arena where various institutional interests interacted to shape the final policy position that accommodated diverse concerns from various government agencies ([Bae, 2010](#)). Inter-agency coordination became crucial in implementing a balanced policy. The National Security Council under President Moon played a central role in aligning the various positions of ministries and government bodies. This process involved extensive consultation, analysis of policy impacts from various perspectives, and formulation of diplomatic strategies that could balance South Korea's security interests with the need to restore economic relations with China without sacrificing the strategic alliance with the United States ([Dewi Sejati, 2020](#)).

The Moon Jae-in administration's approach to the THAAD crisis also reflected changes in South Korea's leadership style and foreign policy orientation. The Moon administration emphasized more proactive and multi-directional diplomacy, seeking to expand South Korea's strategic maneuver space amid great power competition. This approach contrasted with the previous administration's more US alliance-oriented strategy. The Three No's Policy became a manifestation of this strategic reorientation, aiming to create a more sustainable balance between security imperatives and economic interests ([The Korea Herald, 2017](#)). South Korea's governmental decision-making structure, with institutional checks and balances and influences from various interest groups, created an environment where compromise policies like the Three No's Policy could emerge. This policy did not fully meet the initial preferences of the defense or foreign ministries but represented a synthesis of diverse institutional perspectives. This affirms how internal governmental processes, inter-agency coordination, and bureaucratic dynamics shaped South Korea's response to the security dilemma it faced in the context of THAAD deployment and relations with China ([Allison, 1971](#); [S. H. Lee & Paik, 2018](#)).

Idiosyncratic Sources

Idiosyncratic sources in South Korea's foreign policy analysis focus on the personal characteristics, values, experiences, and perceptions of key leaders involved in decision-making. President Moon Jae-in, inaugurated in May 2017 following Park Geun-hye's impeachment, brought a background and political philosophy that significantly influenced the approach to the THAAD issue and relations with China. As a human rights lawyer and democracy activist in his youth, Moon was known for his progressive views and commitment to diplomacy rather than confrontation in handling tensions on the Korean Peninsula ([Snyder, 2018](#)). Moon Jae-in's personal experience as chief of staff under President Roh Moo-hyun (2003-2008) profoundly influenced his policy perspective. The Roh administration was known for its "Sunshine Policy" that emphasized engagement with North Korea and efforts to achieve greater diplomatic balance in relations with major powers. Moon, who helped formulate this approach during Roh's tenure, brought a similar legacy of strategic thinking to his presidency, seeking to expand South Korea's strategic autonomy amid pressures from the United States and China ([C. M. Lee & Botto, 2018](#)).

Moon Jae-in's threat perception toward North Korea differed from that of his predecessor, Park Geun-hye. While Park adopted a tougher approach, emphasizing deterrence through military strengthening and alliance with the US, Moon viewed the North Korean threat through a more complex lens that considered the potential for dialogue and engagement. This did not mean Moon underestimated the threat from North Korea—the THAAD system remained implemented under his leadership—but this more nuanced approach allowed for greater diplomatic flexibility, including efforts to ease tensions with China through the 'Three No's Policy' ([Kelly, 2019](#)). The transition from Park Geun-hye to Moon Jae-in marked a significant shift in South Korean foreign policy-making. Park, daughter of former dictator Park Chung-hee, tended to adopt a more traditional and conservative security approach, emphasizing the US alliance. In contrast, Moon sought to redefine South Korea's position in regional politics by emphasizing greater independence in foreign policy. This difference in personal orientation was reflected in the decision to pursue diplomatic compromise with China through the 'Three No's Policy' while maintaining the THAAD system ([Gao, 2022](#)).

Moon Jae-in's consultative and pragmatic leadership style facilitated the search for a diplomatic solution to the THAAD crisis. Unlike Park's more authoritarian top-down approach, Moon was willing to engage various stakeholders, consider diverse perspectives, and seek middle ground. These leadership characteristics created an environment where compromise solutions like the 'Three No's Policy' could emerge as a response to the security dilemma facing South Korea ([Jaewoo, 2018](#)). Moon Jae-in's personal values and political beliefs—particularly his commitment to diplomacy, regional stability, and strategic autonomy—directly shaped the formulation of the 'Three No's Policy'. This policy reflects Moon's pragmatic approach that acknowledges the structural realities of South Korea's position while seeking to create diplomatic maneuvering space. Through his influence and leadership, Moon successfully articulated a policy that allowed South Korea to maintain the THAAD system as a defense mechanism while offering assurances to China that limited further involvement in US-led regional security architecture ([Jo, 2020](#)).

Role Sources

Role sources in South Korea's foreign policy analysis refer to the country's position and function in regional and global contexts. South Korea occupies a unique position as a middle power in East Asia, attempting to navigate the geopolitical complexity between two major powers: the United States as a security ally and China as its most significant economic partner. This position shapes South Korea's strategic identity and constrains its policy choices, creating a need for flexible and pragmatic diplomatic approaches as demonstrated in the 'Three No's Policy' ([Jeong, 2024](#)). South Korea's role as a United States ally has been the foundation of its security policy since the end of the Korean War. This alliance provides vital security guarantees for South Korea in facing threats from North Korea, but also creates expectations of alignment in strategic approaches to regional issues. The decision to deploy the THAAD system in 2016 strengthened South Korea's role in the US-led security structure in East Asia, but with the unintended consequence of tensions with China, which viewed this move as part of an encirclement strategy by the United States ([Inthaly et al., 2022](#)).

Simultaneously, South Korea's role as China's economic partner has developed dramatically over the past two decades. With China as its largest export destination and import source, South Korea enjoys beneficial economic relations, but also creates significant dependencies. This role as China's major trading partner makes South Korea vulnerable to economic pressure when its security policies conflict with China's interests, as evidenced by the informal sanctions imposed by China after the THAAD deployment decision. This economic dependence limits South Korea's strategic choices and drives the search for diplomatic solutions to ease tensions with China ([The Diplomat, 2023](#)). As a middle power, South Korea has sought to develop niche diplomacy that leverages its position to mediate conflicts, build diplomatic bridges, and contribute to solutions for global problems. This role encourages South Korea to adopt a more balanced and independent approach in its foreign policy, as reflected in the Three No's Policy. Through this policy, South Korea attempts to position itself not as a pawn in great power competition, but as an actor with its strategic agency and distinct national interests ([Holsti, 1970](#)).

The duality of South Korea's role as a US ally and China's economic partner creates contradictory pressures on its foreign policy-making process. On one hand, South Korea needs to maintain the credibility of its alliance with the US, which is essential for its national security. On the other hand, South Korea must manage its economic relationship with China to maintain economic growth and prosperity. The Three No's Policy reflects South Korea's effort to balance these conflicting roles in a way that allows the THAAD deployment to continue while assuring China that South Korea will not be fully integrated into the US-led regional missile defense architecture ([Kang, 2009](#)). South Korea's role as a country on the frontline of tensions on the Korean Peninsula also shapes its policy approach. Being within range of North Korean artillery and missiles, South Korea has an existential interest in seeking solutions to reduce threats from North Korea. However, as a frontline state that depends on regional stability for its economic prosperity, South Korea cannot adopt confrontational policies that might escalate tensions. The Three No's Policy reflects awareness of this dual role, allowing South Korea to maintain enhanced defense capabilities through THAAD while seeking to de-escalate diplomatic tensions with China to maintain broader regional stability ([E. Kim & Cha, 2016](#)).

South Korea's Foreign Policy on THAAD's Deployment

The Three No's Policy represents a compromise policy developed by South Korea to ease tensions with China regarding the deployment of the THAAD system. This policy was officially announced in October 2017 and consists of three main commitments: no additional THAAD deployments, no participation in a US-led regional ballistic missile defense system, and no development of a trilateral security alliance involving Japan. Through these commitments, Seoul sought to assure Beijing that the THAAD deployment would not evolve into a broader strategic threat to China's security interests ([Swaine, 2017](#)). The essence of the Three No's Policy is the recognition of the security dilemma facing South Korea in the context of great power competition in East Asia. On one hand, Seoul needs effective defense capabilities against North Korea's ballistic missile threat, which justifies the THAAD system deployment. On the other hand, South Korea must consider China's strategic sensitivities, which view the THAAD radar system as a violation of its national security due to its potential capability to monitor deep into Chinese territory. The Three No's

Policy offers a middle ground that allows Seoul to maintain the already-installed THAAD while establishing precise limits on further security involvement that might threaten China ([Stangarone, 2019](#)).

The diplomatic significance of this policy lies in its careful balance between commitment to the US alliance and efforts to restore relations with China. Crucially, the Three No's Policy does not require dismantling the already-installed THAAD system, thereby maintaining South Korea's enhanced defense capabilities. At the same time, limitations on further deployments and integration into broader regional security architecture provide meaningful diplomatic concessions to China. This nuanced approach reflects South Korea's strategic maturity in navigating the contradictory pressures from major powers ([Seliger, 2024](#)). Implementation of the Three No's Policy resulted in a gradual softening of China's economic sanctions against South Korea. Although Beijing never officially acknowledged imposing these sanctions, restrictions on group tours to South Korea began to ease, regulatory scrutiny of South Korean companies in China was reduced, and consumer boycott campaigns significantly subsided after the policy announcement. Given its substantial dependence on the Chinese market, this normalization of economic relations was crucial for South Korea. Thus, the Three No's Policy successfully mitigated the negative economic consequences of the THAAD deployment while maintaining enhanced defense capabilities ([Kong, 2022](#)).

The Three No's Policy reflects South Korea's strategic effort to expand its autonomy and diplomatic maneuverability amid great power competition. Rather than fully aligning with either side, this policy allows Seoul to maintain productive relations with both major powers while prioritizing its national interests. This approach is consistent with South Korea's aspirations as a middle power seeking to define an independent role in regional politics rather than merely being an extension of its ally's strategy. Through the compromise articulated in the Three No's Policy, South Korea asserts its strategic agency in the complex regional security landscape ([Chun, 2015](#); [Snyder, 2018](#)). In response to the security dilemma, the Three No's Policy illustrates how middle powers can develop creative solutions to navigate structural pressures from the international system. The policy does not entirely resolve the security challenges facing South Korea—the threat from North Korea remains, as does China's sensitivity toward the THAAD system. However, it creates a *modus vivendi* that allows Seoul to maintain enhanced defense capabilities while managing diplomatic and economic relations with both major powers. This relative success demonstrates the value of pragmatic and nuanced diplomacy in addressing seemingly irresolvable structural dilemmas ([Snyder, 2018](#)).

Cross-Variable Analysis and Critical Evaluation

Rosenau's framework reveals critical interconnections between variables shaping the Three No's Policy, where China's economic pressure (systemic) directly amplified domestic business concerns (societal), while Moon Jae-in's pragmatic leadership (idiosyncratic) aligned with South Korea's middle power aspirations (role) to enable policy reorientation through governmental coordination mechanisms. The policy achieved mixed results: successfully restoring economic relations with China by late 2017 while retaining THAAD, constraining future security options, and creating a

precedent for economic coercion effectiveness. Regional implications remain ambiguous, as the policy demonstrated creative diplomacy potential yet revealed middle power autonomy fragility amid great power competition. Future sustainability faces challenges from continued North Korean threats requiring enhanced defenses, escalating US-China rivalry demanding more precise alignment, and potential domestic political changes, suggesting the Three No's Policy provided temporary relief rather than a sustainable solution to structural pressures facing South Korea's strategic autonomy.

CONCLUSION

This research demonstrates that South Korea's Three No's Policy represents a sophisticated diplomatic response to the security dilemma created by the THAAD deployment and subsequent tensions with China. Through Rosenau's Five-Variable Model, we identified how systemic constraints, societal pressures, governmental processes, leadership characteristics, and South Korea's middle power role collectively shaped this compromise policy. The findings reveal how Seoul strategically balanced its security imperatives with economic interests, successfully maintaining the THAAD system while alleviating Chinese economic pressure. This case illustrates the complex policy calculations facing middle powers navigating great power competition in East Asia, where security alliances and economic interdependencies often pull in opposing directions.

Theoretically, this study contributes to foreign policy analysis by demonstrating the continuing relevance of Rosenau's multi-level framework in explaining contemporary security dilemmas. The research empirically validates how leadership transition, from Park's security-focused approach to Moon's more balanced orientation, served as a critical catalyst for policy reorientation. Additionally, it provides valuable insights into how middle powers can maintain strategic autonomy despite structural constraints, offering a model for other states facing similar security-economic trade-offs in an increasingly competitive regional environment.

Beyond theoretical contributions, this research offers practical policy implications for middle powers navigating similar security-economic dilemmas. First, policymakers should develop flexible diplomatic frameworks that allow simultaneous engagement with competing major powers without complete alignment with either side. Second, middle powers can leverage their strategic position to create "buffer policies" that provide security assurances to one party while maintaining essential partnerships with another. Third, the Three No's Policy model demonstrates that compromise solutions can preserve core security interests while mitigating economic vulnerabilities.

For countries like Vietnam facing US-China competition, or Philippines balancing security partnerships with economic dependencies, South Korea's approach offers valuable lessons in maintaining strategic autonomy. Future research should examine the long-term sustainability of the Three No's Policy beyond 2018, conduct comparative analysis with similar middle power strategies in ASEAN countries facing analogous dilemmas, and investigate how domestic political transitions affect the durability of compromise foreign policies. Additionally, scholars should

explore whether the Three No's model can be adapted to other regional contexts where middle powers face comparable pressures between security alliances and economic partnerships.

This research conceptualized the research framework, designed the methodology, conducted data collection and analysis using Rosenau's Five-Variable Model, interpreted findings related to South Korea's foreign policy decision-making, and drafted the manuscript, including introduction, literature review, methodology, results, discussion, and conclusion sections. The authors declare no potential conflicts of interest concerning the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article. No financial, personal, or professional relationships that could potentially bias the research findings or manuscript preparation have been identified. This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors. The study was conducted independently without external financial support. No funding organization influenced the research design, data collection, analysis, interpretation of results, or preparation of this manuscript.

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