



RoK's Jeju Island Naval Base

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Summary

The Republic of Korea's (RoK) plan to develop a naval base in the Jeju Island has led to controversy both within the country as well as in the region. The plan is intended to serve two objectives: to protect the country from possible missile attacks from North Korea and to allow the United States to station Aegis class destroyers outfitted with missile defence systems. Suspicions about the base being intended as part of a military containment strategy against China are unwarranted given that the US ballistic missile defence architecture in Asia is not designed to shield Japan, Taiwan, or any other country in the region from China's vast missile ballistic arsenal. Besides, it is within RoK's sovereign right to secure its territory from possible external attack, especially from its hostile northern neighbour. Moreover, the new naval base appears to be part of a broader strategy to enhance the RoK's maritime presence.

The Republic of Korea (RoK) has started to build a naval base in a small village on its largest island, the Jeju Island, which is located off its southern coast. It plans to allow its own ships as well as those of the United States to station on the island Aegis class destroyers equipped with missile defence systems.

Domestic Opposition to the Base

The Gangjeong village on Jeju Island was chosen as the site for the naval base in 2007. The Gangjeong villagers, mostly farmers and fishermen, along with civil rights groups have strongly opposed the project. When the RoK Navy announced the resumption of construction, the government pledged to suppress the protestors.¹ But, the protestors are determined to persist with their struggle to get the project cancelled.

Jeju Island has had a difficult history. During World War II, Japanese troops stationed there used the islanders as forced labour and murdered many. Even during the Korean War, the troops of the South killed as many as 30,000 islanders, who were declared communists because of their opposition to a division of the island. In subsequent years, Jeju gradually regained its pristine culture and was designated by UNESCO as a world natural heritage site. On the Jeju Island the pristine coral reefs, fishing, and tangerine groves are an integral part of the people's lives. The coral reefs have been named by the United Nations as key "environmental treasures" that should be preserved. Building a naval base on top of these wonders of nature, it is argued, will cause environmental problems.²

The need for a naval post on Jeju was first raised in 1993. However, it was the Roh Moo-hyun administration that made the final decision in 2007 to build a naval base on the island. At that time, Roh had observed: "Peace without armament cannot exist", adding that a naval base on the island is crucial for the country's national security.³ However, before he died, Roh expressed regret about permitting the naval base on Jeju Island.⁴ He also apologized for the massacre during the Korean War and declared Jeju Island the island of Global Peace.⁵

¹ Kim Tae-jong, "Protestors, Authorities on Collision Course in Gangjeong Village", *The Korea Times*, August 7, 2011, available at <http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/include/print.asp?newsIdx=92354>.

² Bruce Gagnon, "Environmental Catastrophe: US Naval Base on Jeju Island, South Korea", January 12, 2010, available at <http://www.globalresearch.ca/PrintArticle.php?articleId=16918>.

³ "Push Jeju Base Forward", *JoongAng Daily*, editorial, August 9, 2011, available at <http://english.yonhapnews.co.kr/jscript/EnPrint.html>

⁴ Gloria Steinem, "The Arms Race Intrudes on Paradise", *The New York Times*, August 6, 2011, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/07/opinion/sunday/Steinem-the-arms-race-intrudes-on-a>

⁵ *Ibid*

The four-year conflict has threatened to escalate into a major domestic problem for the government of President Lee Myung-bak, with leaders of five opposition parties promising to abolish the project. The naval base, it is argued, will provoke severe conflict between the US and China in the East Asian region. It is also alleged that the base will be linked to the RoK's participation in the US-led missile defence system, thus making the Island a potential military target for anti-US militants. Moreover, those opposed to the base argue that it is likely to contribute to further militarization of the Asia-Pacific region. It could trigger war as well.⁶ Jeju Island, called the peace island, thus runs the risk of becoming a prime military target.

But, the Lee government seems determined. As a former head of a construction company, Lee is known as "Mr. Bulldozer". He is alleged "to have the same relationship to construction that President George W. Bush had to oil."⁷ He has allowed the Navy to erect a three-metre high wall along the 1.6 km perimeter of the site to ban protestors from entering and disturbing construction. Some protestors from the village have been moving about with steel chains binding their bodies, symbolizing the legal restrictions imposed on them. The authorities in Seoul argue that the naval base will be built in an eco-friendly manner and that it will help boost the local economy and bolster coastal defence.

The resentment of the people and the patience of the government have reached their limits and a win-win settlement does not appear possible. Several factors have contributed to this situation. Firstly, the base project was conceived in the mid-1990s but the Navy has been ambivalent about its exact location. When Gangjeong was finally chosen as the site, the military and civilian authorities were unable to explain the national security and economic logic to the residents of the area, thus heightening the suspicion of the local residents. Secondly, when the voice of the 87 resident representatives in favour of the naval base prevailed in April 2007, the local residents opposed the government's decision with a resounding no and demanded a community consensus. But they were ignored by the authorities. Thirdly, the support of outside activists who were opposed to the project because of economic, environmental and other reasons has emboldened the residents of Gangjeong. Even strategic analysts in the RoK have begun to raise serious questions about "the necessity of a large naval station facing the Pacific Ocean in connection with the Korean Navy's newly-adopted vision of an ocean-going maritime force."⁸

⁶ Bruce K. Gagnon, "Protest Leaders Arrested on Jeju Island for Blocking Navy Base Construction", May 19, 2011, available at <http://warisacrime.org/print/57899>.

⁷ Gloria Steinem, note 4.

⁸ "Jeju naval project", *The Korea Herald*, editorial, 2 August 2011, <http://www/koreaherald.com/pop/NewsPrint.jsp?newsMLId=20110802000019>

Jeju's Strategic Importance

Analysts point out that China's enhanced naval capability in the region is what triggered the RoK's decision to develop the base. Under the plan, the base's port will be long enough to serve as a home port for the RoK's growing fleet of large and sophisticated warships. The base will accommodate 20 modern surface warships and submarines. There is also proposed space to dock two 150,000-ton cruise liners. It will also be used as a luxury commercial dock and an environment-friendly tourist spot. The RoK is committed to spend 977 billion Won to construct the 480,000-square-meter base by 2014. It has already spent 130 billion Won.⁹



Source: <http://www.worldatlas.com/aatlas/infopage/yellowsea.htm>

Further, the RoK has seen the worst provocations from its northern neighbours in 2011 in the coastal waters of the West Sea. As a result, the civilian and military communities in the country have felt the need to dramatically bolster the coastal defence. Another rationale for the base is the RoK Navy's likely shift in focus from coastal defence to an ocean-going Navy in order to protect the sea lanes of communication as one of the world's major trading powers. The RoK has its own project to build a blue water navy. Currently, its ocean-going force is built around an arsenal of sophisticated guided missile destroyers,

⁹ Kim Tae-jong, "Row Deepens over Naval Base Project in Jeju", *The Korea Times*, August 7, 2011, available at <http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/include/print.asp?newsIdx=92354>

including the two recently acquired 7,600-ton Aegis-equipped destroyers. One more destroyer is under construction. Besides, it has half a dozen 4,500-ton destroyers, submarines and amphibious assault ships.¹⁰ The flagship of RoK's strategic fleet is an 18,000 ton, flat-topped amphibious assault ship - named *Dokdo* after the island in the Sea of Japan which is under dispute between the RoK and Japan.

Apart from building a blue water navy to project power beyond its coastline, the RoK also aims to increase participation in international peacekeeping operations and disaster recovery and relief efforts. In the past, several destroyers of the RoK participated in anti-piracy patrols off Somalia's coast, along with warships from Japan and China. Seen from this perspective, a naval base on the south side of Jeju seems to be a logical step in the RoK's blue water ambitions, as it allows direct access to open seas and would enhance its maritime flexibility.

Security Arguments against the Base

President Lee's government has projected that the Jeju naval base is necessary to ward off attacks from North Korea. However, strategists believe that the base is meant to contain China. In a prominent op-ed in the *New York Times* on August 5, 2011, Christine Ahn, executive director of the Korea Policy Institute and a member of the Global Campaign to Save Jeju Island, accused the Pentagon and the RoK Government of turning the island paradise into a missile defence base to support a US military containment strategy against China.¹¹ She contests President Lee's assertion that the base is needed to protect Seoul from a North Korean attack, given that the Pentagon had submitted a report to the US Congress in 1999 in which it had verified that the Aegis system "could not defend the northern two-thirds of South Korea against the low flying short range TBMs [Taepodong Ballistic Missiles]".¹² Ahn further argues that "the militarization of Jeju Island will introduce new security threats to the country by fueling an arms race in an increasingly tense region of unresolved conflicts. The naval base on Jeju Island will equip South Koreans and their American allies with the capability to strike long-range ballistic missile batteries in southeast China that target Japan or Taiwan. Washington sees this base as a central pillar to its defense system in the Asia-Pacific region. China, no doubt, sees it as a new threat."¹³

¹⁰ Todd Crowell, "Seoul wants a Blue-Water Navy", *Asia Sentinel*, July 22, 2011, available at http://www.asiasentinel.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=3337&Itemid...

¹¹ Christine Ahn, "Unwanted Missiles for a Korean Island", *The New York Times*, August 5, 2011, available at http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/06/opinion/06iht-edahn06.html?_r=2&pagewanted=print

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid*

A Rand Corporation report of 2009 also confirms that in view of China's growing economic threat to the US, the Jeju naval base is crucial for the US "to project power in the East China Sea and southward."¹⁴ Because of its own strategic interests the US is putting pressure on the RoK to build the Jeju base. Ahn warns, "Jeju is a bellwether of how conflicts in the Asia Pacific may be resolved in the near future. Will the South Korean people allow its government to blindly follow US plans to draw its country in a standoff against China? Will the South Korean government choose to resolve conflicts through dialogue and cooperation?"¹⁵ She argues that the unneeded military base will only destroy Gangjeong's rich marine ecology and the livelihood of farmers men and haenyo (people who provide with human security; also called women deep-sea divers) and therefore cannot be justified in the name of "national security".

It has also been alleged that the Jeju Island base may be a clever US strategy to create an 'Asian NATO' to contain China's military. According to Dai Xu, the US has not only announced its willingness to intervene in the affairs of the South China Sea, but is also targeting Chinese dominance of the air and sea. In addition, it is also trying to persuade Japan, Korea, Australia, India, and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) into forming a kind of "Asian NATO", which will be distributed along China's soft underbelly similar to the 'encirclement' seen during the Cold War, and which scholars have called the 'first and second island chain.'" He goes on to argue that the current 10th consecutive US-South Korea exercises in the South China and Yellow Seas make it imperative for Chinese 'dignity' to show the Americans the 'red line' beyond which they may not cross.¹⁶

There are also others who voice opinions against the base. Gloria Steinem, an activist and a co-founder of the Women's Media Center in the US, supports Ahn's position saying that the naval base will be not only an "environmental disaster" for the island less than two-thirds the size of Rhodes Island but will be "a globally dangerous provocation".¹⁷ Steinem writes, "I fear South Korea is a tail being wagged by the Pentagon dog."¹⁸

Security Arguments in Favour of the Base

There are, however, other views that reject the assertions made by Ahn and Steinem. Those who argue in favour of the base agree that the Aegis destroyers based on the

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Dai Xu, "China Must Draw a Red Line Against American 'Encirclement'", *The Global Times*, August 2, 2011, available at <http://worldmeets.us/globaltimes000029.shtml#axzz1W2SSyP2Z>.

¹⁷ Gloria Steinem, note 4

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

island cannot defend Seoul from short-range ballistic missiles but would definitely protect Pusan and other strategically important sites in southern Korea. They further say that ships operating out of Jeju Island can help shield Japan and the US forces based there from the North Korean TBMs. It is therefore argued that the US missile defence system is not designed to counter China's expanding number of ballistic missiles. As both the US and the RoK are alliance partners, the US is under obligation to protect the RoK from external attack, besides continuing to address broader extra-Korean issues where the two countries share important interests.

There has been some restructuring of the US command forces in the RoK. In the past decade, the US has closed more than a dozen military bases and the ownership transfer has reduced the burden on many local communities. As the RoK's military capabilities have improved, the US Forces in Korea have transferred some important combat missions to the RoK while at the same time retaining certain US military assets following specific requests from the RoK. "These assets include the Multiple Rocket Launching System stationed along the DMZ, the AN/TPQ radar that detects the movement of North Korean long-range artillery, and upgraded Apache helicopters."¹⁹

The China factor notwithstanding, there has been a paradigm shift in security priorities in both the US and the RoK in view of the changing dynamics of the security environment in the region. This has necessitated an increase in focus to improve conventional weaponry in both the countries. In practical terms, the US is reducing the number of troops permanently stationed in the RoK and changing the location of these forces. According to the US, the continued stationing of US troops to serve as a "tripwire" located along the intra-Korean border to guarantee that the US forces would intervene militarily to help a North Korean invasion has lost its rationale. Instead, "enhancements in US transportation, logistics, and long-range precision-strike capabilities would enable US forces to rapidly reinforce and supplement their units on the Peninsula, providing they could overcome any North Korean missiles and other anti-access weapons."²⁰

But, some in the RoK contend that the change in the US strategy in terms of redistributing troops and missions is intended to upgrade the RoK's military capabilities in the face of the declining US confidence in its own military capabilities as well as the imperative of reducing overseas commitments. This throws into relief the question of US commitment to the RoK's security. Those who support the Jeju base see it from this strategic perspective, and cite the examples of Richard Nixon's removal of the 7th Infantry Brigade in 1971 and Jimmy Carter's 1976 proposal to withdraw all US troops from Korea.²¹

¹⁹ Richard Weitz, "Why US Needs South Korea Base", *The Diplomat*, August 21, 2011, available at <http://the-diplomat.com/2011/08/21/why-us-needs-south-korea-base/?print=yes>

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*

However, the fact remains that the US and RoK have put in place measures to ensure reinforcements from Japan through Pusan and other areas of the RoK when a crisis erupts. "These facilities need protection from the missile defences that will be located in South Korea, Japan, and on the ships operating out of the Jeju Island base."²² Moreover, it is not clear whether the US can provide greater protection to the RoK's border regions by positioning interceptors closer to the De-militarised Zone (DMZ), since North Korea possess a large number of short-range missiles that could hit targets in the RoK. In order to guarantee its ally's security, the US, therefore, would need an enormous number of interceptor rockets to destroy incoming missiles from the North, besides having extensive command and control facilities in place.

Conclusion

Notwithstanding the security arguments for and against the development of the naval base in Jeju Island, it is within the RoK's sovereign right to craft its own security strategy including for the purpose of protecting its maritime interests. The RoK may be developing the base to make it a part of the US missile defence system as it is an alliance partner of the US. The argument that it is a US design to pursue a military containment strategy against China is flawed given that the US ballistic missile defence architecture in Asia is not designed to shield Japan, Taiwan, or any other country in the region from China's vast missile ballistic arsenal. Instead, ship-based interceptors are meant to cater for the missile threats posed by North Korea. Even in this case, ship-based interceptors can be used only as part of an overall defensive strategy to deter aggression and further provocation from Pyongyang. The development of the Jeju Island naval base by the Lee Government must, therefore, be seen as part of a broader strategy to enhance the RoK's maritime presence and deter threats from North Korea.

²² *Ibid.*