



SOUTH KOREA'S "ISLAND OF PEACE": A FLASHPOINT IN THE EAST CHINA SEA?

Sangsoo Lee & Stefano Facchinetti

Renewed impetus has been put into building a military naval base on the strategically located island of Jeju, off the coast of South Korea. With the rise of tensions in the East China Sea and Yellow Sea, the island is seen by Seoul to be important to its security interests. However, the base could negatively affect the regional security balance, in particular worsening relations with China, which views the base as potentially part of a strategy of containment by the United States.

Jeju Island (Jeju-do in Korean) holds a special importance for South Korea. Located some 100 kilometers off the southwest tip of the country in the East China Sea, it is renowned both for its natural beauty—being home to the country's highest mountain—as well as its strategic location between China, Japan, and the Korean Peninsula. On account of the latter, plans to construct a naval base on Jeju were announced in 1993 as a means of enhancing South Korea's strategic defense interests. Experiencing many delays, the project is nonetheless now finally slated for completion in 2015 under the plans of the Park Geon-hye administration.

Strategic Outpost

In recent years, Jeju has assumed a renewed strategic relevance for South Korea in the light of China's naval expansion and increased presence in the East China Sea; not only this, but the island is also located close to Japan of which South Koreans continue to be wary. Furthermore, the importance of the Jeju naval base is to safeguard sea-lanes deemed as vital for South Korea's trade in the Pacific Ocean, as well as a defensive measure against North Korea. The building of the base is part of Seoul's intent to become more actively involved in the East China Sea, improving its capabilities of power projection at sea and "catching up" with its neighbors which have sought to increase their assertiveness in maritime matters.

China has already interpreted the establishment of the naval base on Jeju—situated only 490 kilometers away from Shanghai—as a threat. Some Chinese media outlets have accused South Korea of wanting to turn the island

from a "peaceful window" into a weapon aimed at its neighbor. Accordingly, there is concern that the U.S. might access Jeju as a further strategic outpost under the terms of the mutual security alliance. Indeed, both the Mutual Defense Treaty and the Status of Forces Agreement between the U.S. and South Korea stipulate that the U.S. military retains wartime command over the South Korean military. There is speculation that the Jeju naval base could be used by the U.S.—in particular as an aircraft carrier base for its navy—in seeking to contain China as part of a defense line that includes, among others, the Guam and Okinawa military bases.

Such fears are not unfounded. The U.S. has recently boosted military alliances across the Asia-Pacific as a part of its "pivot to Asia" strategy with plans of locating 60 percent of all U.S. naval forces to the region by 2020. Earlier this year, U.S. Naval Forces Korea established a new headquarters facility at a South Korean naval base in Busan—to which the aircraft carrier *U.S.S. George Washington* arrived on October 4 for the annual U.S.-ROK military exercises—and the U.S. navy is expected to increase its presence in South Korea in the years ahead.

A Double-Edged Sword

The South Korean government sees the Jeju base as being important for its national security interests, in particular among the country's more right-wing politicians who have emphasized the need for closer military cooperation with the U.S. against China and North Korea. Still strongly dependent on the U.S. for its security, President Park has indicated her commitment to strengthening the ROK-U.S.



strategic alliance.

However, the issue of Jeju also throws a spotlight on the fact that China is important—and not just a threat—to South Korea's national interests. Due to China's continued economic rise, market growth, and size, South Korea is increasingly dependent on China's economy. China has become South Korea's leading trading partner and its number one export destination market. Bilateral trade volumes attained US\$256.2 billion in 2012. In view of this, President Park has also recognized that a closer partnership with China is necessary to enhance South Korea's economic interests.

The naval base in Jeju therefore represents somewhat of a quandary. On the one hand, it would help buttress the strategic alliance with the U.S.; on the other, its construction would certainly antagonize Beijing—thus endangering economic relations—as well as cause tensions to rise between China and the U.S. Simultaneously bolstering strategic relations with the latter while pursuing a “strategic comprehensive partnership” with China is a difficult juggling act for the South Korean government to perform. It is therefore likely that the Jeju naval base—if and when completed—will undermine the security framework in the region, especially if the U.S. utilizes the naval base as a stronghold against China. It has been argued that the military base would likely accommodate not only the Aegis sea-based anti-ballistic defense system but also U.S. nuclear-powered submarines. Beijing has already labeled the U.S. Aegis system in the Pacific a “dangerous provocation.” Furthermore, having U.S. nuclear submarines at such a short distance from its coasts would cause great consternation in Beijing. This could potentially ignite an arms race between the U.S. and China in the region.

“Island of Peace”

Jeju has had a tragic modern history: tens of thousands of communist guerrillas were killed by the South Korean army on Jeju in 1949. Former President Roh Moo-hyun issued an apology for the massacre, rape, and torture inflicted upon the people of Jeju, and the island was symbolically designated an “Island of Peace” in 2005. Turning a negative into a positive, the island's central geographic position in North-east Asia between China, Japan, and the Korean Peninsula, allied with its tragic history and natural beauty, could be used as a tool for the promotion of peace and reconciliation. In 2007 UNESCO designated Jeju a World Heritage Site

in recognition of its outstanding biological diversity. Particularly noteworthy is the fact that, according to *Chosun Ilbo*, some 60 percent of tourists (this year) arriving to the island were Chinese; the island is also an important destination for Japanese tourists. Tourism plays a role in increasing cross-border linkages between the peoples of the region. The island is also host to the Jeju Forum for Peace and Prosperity, promoting regional multilateral dialogue, as well as a war history museum.

The building of the naval base therefore will not only have an adverse environmental impact, facing opposition from local residents, but also potentially harm the booming tourist industry and negate its image as an “island of peace.” This behooves Seoul to reduce to the extent possible the negative consequences resulting from its construction.

However, it is the impact on relations with China that is of greatest concern. In this context, Seoul should reassure Beijing that the motivation for the base is not to contain China but for South Korea's national defense purposes. The question therein is whether the U.S. navy will have access to the base, and to what extent. Notwithstanding, Seoul needs to demonstrate goodwill and should increase military exchanges and cooperation with China in the name of regional stability and peace.

Dr. Sangsoo Lee is a Research Fellow at the Institute for Security Development Policy. Stefano Facchinetti holds a Master's Degree in International Relations and Diplomacy from the University of Trieste (Italy). He was a former intern at ISDP.

The opinions expressed in this Policy Brief are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Institute for Security and Development Policy or its sponsors.

© The Institute for Security and Development Policy, 2013. This Policy Brief can be freely reproduced provided that ISDP is informed.

ABOUT ISDP

The Institute for Security and Development Policy is a Stockholm-based independent and non-profit research and policy institute. The Institute is dedicated to expanding understanding of international affairs, particularly the interrelationship between the issue areas of conflict, security and development. The Institute's primary areas of geographic focus are Asia and Europe's neighborhood.

WEBSITE: WWW.ISDP.EU