

Importance of Jeju Civilian-Military Port

by Sung Chan Kim and Seok-ho Kang

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Seoul's announcement, 15 days after Beijing declared its own Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ), that it will expand Korea's ADIZ suggests that the Republic of Korea (ROK), the People's Republic of China (PRC), and Japan have reached an end to overt diplomatic maneuvers without a clear understanding of how the overlapping zones would be enforced. As the ADIZs do not translate into territorial or maritime claims, a reasonable agreement could be arranged among the countries to ease heightened tensions. Unfortunately, when it comes to territorial or maritime disputes, agreeing to disagree or ignoring encroachments to one's claims is not a realistic option and tensions could persist. Under the circumstances, ROK's southernmost naval port under construction on Jeju Island gains significant strategic importance, not only for Seoul, but also for maintaining regional peace and security.

The Jeju Civilian-Military Complex Port, as it is called today, has been planned since 1993 and underwent various changes to become a port that will be used by the Navy and cruise companies. It is designed to be eco-friendly and a significant distance from natural reserves or heritage sites of the island. The port will be able to hold about 20 naval vessels and submarines.

The port's primary purpose is to host the ROK Navy's Maritime Task Flotilla. The flotilla aims to secure the Sea Lines of Communication (SLOC) for ROK shipping traffic and to protect national maritime boundaries. Ieodo (also referred to as Socotra Rock), a submerged rock approximately 170 kilometers southwest of Jeju Island, is one of the southernmost maritime domains the Navy ships will protect. Although Seoul has maintained control over Ieodo and operates a scientific research station at the site, Beijing has laid claims to the area, and now the ADIZs of the ROK, the PRC, and Japan all cover airspace above Ieodo. By having the flotilla deployed at Jeju, the response time to reach Ieodo would be about eight hours rather than 23 hours from Busan or 15 and a half hours from Mokpo. Considering that response times would be about 18 hours for PRC forces and 21 hours for Japanese forces, Jeju port is of great importance for Seoul to protect Ieodo. As the PRC and Japanese navies grow stronger, the ROK Navy's presence near Ieodo would also prevent either side from gaining dominance in the area.

Additionally, the flotilla from the Jeju port will be in charge of securing SLOCs connecting the ROK with shipping lanes to the Middle East and Europe. The ROK's complete dependence on foreign sources of crude oil, of which 99.8 percent is imported via the SLOC passing through the Ieodo area and the waters south of Jeju, makes the task of securing freedom of navigation through the area a critical matter of national security. Studies show that a mere 15-day long disruption of SLOCs in the area would devastate the ROK economy, which relies heavily on international trade.

Despite this critical importance of the Jeju port to the ROK, opponents claim that the port is merely a United States Navy forward base to be used to contain the PRC. Unfounded claims have ranged from the US Department of Defense forcing Seoul to build the port to an almost certain expectation that US unmanned bombers will be launched from it. But clearly, Seoul has ample reasons to build a naval port on Jeju for its own national interest. Given the bilateral relationship between the ROK and the US, it is impossible to believe rhetoric like that of the Pyongyang propaganda machine, which insists that Seoul is a puppet of Washington and does whatever the US tells it to do, including building a naval port on Jeju. One also wonders how an unmanned bomber would take off from the Jeju Civilian-Military Complex Port, which doesn't have an airfield.

Opponents also claim that US Navy vessels will be deployed to the Jeju port, which will provoke Beijing and somehow plunge the region into war, because the Jeju port is the closest "US military base" to the PRC, only 500 kilometers from Shanghai. If mere visits by US Navy ships turn a port into a "US military base," then according to this logic, frequent visits by US Navy guided missile destroyers to the port in Pyongtaek, the home of the ROK Navy Second Fleet Command, should have instigated a war with the PRC. After all, Pyongtaek port is only about 370 kilometers from the PRC's Shandong Province, much closer to the PRC than the Jeju port. However, during the more than 24 years the Pyongtaek port has serviced naval vessels, ROK-PRC relations have been elevated to a strategic partnership since May 2008, and confidence-building measures have taken place, such as a ROK chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff visiting PRC military bases and the setting up of hotlines.

The building of the Jeju Civilian-Military Complex Port is a strategic and necessary choice for Seoul to protect the country's interests and prosperity. Proceeding with the existing plan of completion in 2015 without further delay for this important port is warranted.

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