

Conflicts over Jeju naval base in South Korea

Naval Base: Development or Occupation?

In 2002, the South Korean government initiated a project to build a strategic naval base on the southern resort island of Jeju, but it was postponed due to opposition from local residents till, in May 2007, the government proceeded with construction in the tiny fishing village of Gangjeong in Jeju. Activists and villagers, however, still strongly oppose the construction.

The plan is to build a military port by 2014 that can accommodate 20 warships and two 331-million lb cruise liners. The project will spend a total of \$860 million. According to the defense ministry, about 14 percent of the construction work has been completed so far. If all goes as planned, the military dock will moonlight as a luxury commercial dock as well as an eco-friendly tourism hub. Once completed in 2014, the navy says it will protect shipping lanes for South Korea's export-driven economy, which is dependent on imported oil. In addition, in terms of an exclusive economic (water) zone (EEZ), it will also enable South Korea to respond quickly to a brewing territorial dispute with China over Ieodo, a submerged reef south of Jeju that the Chinese call Socotra Rock. Both sides believe it is surrounded abundantly by pre-empt oil and other natural resources in surrounding waters.

The military defends the facility as necessary to strengthen national security and to increase military mobility in the southern maritime territory. Above all, government and navy officials claim that Korea needs to reinforce its military capacity as it lags far behind its neighboring powers in terms of military might. Korea's defense budget stood at \$24.5 billion in 2009, which

was only a fraction of the \$78 billion and \$45.6 billion that China and Japan spent respectively in that year, according to the 2010 Defense White Paper. Col. Jeong Sam-man of Korea Naval War College said, “A proverb says if you wish for peace, prepare for war, and history shows that peace cannot exist when one is defenseless.” On top of that, supporters of the plan expect that the naval port will bring economic benefits to local people by inducing direct investment into the region from the construction of infrastructure for sailors.

However, from the beginning of construction, peaceful demonstrations have been a continuous presence. In fact, the construction was suspended in June 2011, when a group of village residents and civic activists occupied the site, claiming that it will eventually be used to accommodate U.S. troops and thus ignite a conflict with China.

Two months later, in August 2011, the Jeju Police mobilized about 600 riot police troops to disperse this group of sit-in protesters consisting of nearly 100 residents and anti-base activists who had been occupying the site despite an eviction order. As a result, violent clashes have on several occasions erupted between police and protesters. To block off protestors, the Navy has set up fences around the site and resumed the construction work. At least 30 protesters who violently resisted riot troops were detained.

In the meantime, the “village” of about a thousand people is divided over the port. Heated protesting has occurred and people are starting to avoid each other, some not even shopping at the same stores. A representative of Gangjeong village claims that recently 75~80% of residents are still opposed to the construction.

Given the unique dynamic relations of Korea in Northeast Asia, it has become evident that there are too many sets of opposing values and priorities to reach a clear consensus: the U.S. vs. China, pacifism vs. national interest, environment vs. development, state vs. citizens, and so on.

The residents' claims for justice

The residents of Kangjeong village demand that four conditions be met in order to justify the construction of the naval base: 1) democratic and legal procedure, 2) the absolute necessity in terms of national security, 3) right compensation, and 4) the propriety of selecting place.

However, they argue that the project does not satisfy these conditions and therefore, there is no justification for the on-going construction., In their eyes, the naval base is only further evidence of the oppressive arrogance of governmental authority.

The most serious problem is the absence of procedural justice over a long period of time.¹ As a matter of fact, the selection of Kangjeong village over other locations took no more than 15 days.

The vote by the residents occurred rapidly and carelessly, without a presentation or a public hearing to provide information sufficient for understanding the positive and negative effects of the construction.

¹ John Rawls says, “*there is a correct or fair procedure such that the outcome is likewise correct or fair, whatever it is, provided that the procedure has been properly followed.*” See John Rawls, “A Theory of Justice: Original Edition, Harvard University Press, 2005. pp 84-86.

In a democratic society, each person should have the same equal right to the basic liberty as others.² These basic liberties include freedom of thought, right to vote, and freedom of association. However, such rights have been totally disregarded. It seems that governmental authorities are willing, for the sake of national interests and security, to disregard the rights of local peoples and to execute coercive powers on those residents—the residents who simply demand reassessment of the naval base project that was initiated by rash procedural justice as well as by insufficient knowledge. The government is demonstrating no respect for the integrity and rights of the residents’ personhood.³ Nor is this new. Gangjeong village has been here before. On April 3, 1948, 14,000 villagers were killed in “the 4.3 Incident,” a series of events that began on March 1, 1947, and continued through September 1954, consisting largely of police and military crackdowns on Jeju islanders, who were protesting elections that set up a government only in the southern half of the Korean Peninsula. The protesters were labeled communist sympathizers. Now, National Police Chief Cho Hyun-o calls for strict law enforcement in the same tone and manner used to threaten the Jeju people in March 1947.

Justice or Peace?

Given the division of Korea into North and South, it is reasonable to expect some inequalities for the sake of national security. As Martin Luther said, “Peace is more important than all justice; and peace was not made for the sake of justice, but justice for the sake of peace.” In that sense, South Korea may need peace more than it does justice. However, the naval base may also be a

² First of two principles of justice: “*Each person is to have an equal right to the basic liberty compatible with a similar liberty for others.*” See John Rawls, *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*. 2nd ed., Harvard University Press, 2001. p 60.

³ John Rawls says, “...*equal basic liberties in this principle are specified by a list as follows: freedom of thought...and as well as the rights and liberties specified by the liberty and integrity (physical and psychological) of the person....*” See *Ibid*, p 44.

threat to peace as it could trigger, or exacerbate, an arms race in Asia. Even though the Korean government has denied participation in a Missile Defense (MD) system, Jeju naval base has the potential to be used as means of U.S. MD strategy for the purpose of checking China, thereby increasing military tensions with Japan and China. Moreover, the nation has since dropped the concept of the so-called Great Ocean Navy and instead focused on coastal defense from North Korean provocation, for which a port in Jeju would not be of much help.

Even if the base does not threaten peace, inequality (in this case, the subordination of the rights of the villagers to the interests of the nation), legitimized by national security, requires, if it is to be justified, that the *benefits* be distributed fairly and impartially. If there is any partiality, the least advantaged members of society (like the villagers) should be the ones to receive the greatest benefit.⁴ For that to happen, there would have to be fair financial compensation for the use of the land. There is no such fair compensation.

This lack of fair compensation is not due to lack of resources or precedent. When the American military bases in Korea relocated from Yongsan in Seoul to southern Pyeongtaek, the Korean government provided \$920 million. In addition, it approved the investment of \$1.8 billion to the local development plan of Pyeongtaek. In contrast, the compensation scale for the loss caused by the construction of the naval base in Jeju is a twentieth of the scale applied to Pyeongtaek.

The absence of specific distribution plan for each person is also problematic. For example, a village man making a living only from fishing should get more compensation than others who

⁴ This is consonant with Maximin rule – “*the rule directs our attention to the worst that can happen under any proposed course of action and to decide in the right of that.*” See John Rawls, *Theory of Justice*, p 154.

have another means of support such as field or agriculture, etc. Compensation is calculated and distributed as “would-be benefit,” i.e. the economic benefits from the construction of the port. Opponents have argued that the construction does not necessarily translate to future economic growth, citing the case of Japan's Okinawa, where American troops are being stationed and the local economy is stagnant.

Finally, there is no environmental value assessment.⁵ Opponents claim it will ruin the village's ecosystem. A coalition of local residents and progressive civic groups are still opposed to the plan, which they argue would cause environmental hazards and harm the image of the “peace island.” The island, designated by the central government as “Peace Island” in 2005, is home not only to its 530,000 residents but also to nine UNESCO-designated Global Geo Parks, three World Natural Heritage sites, and a Biosphere Reserve.

All things considered, the people of Gangjeong Village are emerging, again, as the victims of injustice. Given political and economic relations among Korea, Japan, China, and the U.S., the issues of peace, national interest, and national security are often given absolute priority over other considerations in Korea. However, the compulsory sacrifice of the few for the many is incompatible with justice. To avoid repeating history, the Jeju naval base project should be carefully and thoroughly reconsidered in terms of mutual benefits of justice.

⁵ John Rawls says, “*But even this wider theory fails to embrace all moral relationships, since it would seem to include only our relations with other persons and to leave out of account how we are to conduct ourselves toward animals and the rest of nature.*” See *Theory of Justice*, p 17. I think that the absence of consideration of nature and environment is Rawls’ limit. In particular, in case of the buildup of Jeju naval base, a environment – eco-friendly or protection of environment – is a very important factor even though it is pretty political issue.



(Figure 1 – expecting air view)



(Figure 2 – the base location)



(Figure 3 – Northeast Asia map and the location of Jeju island)