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## **Home or Away? South Korea's New Naval Base**

*By Geoffrey Till*

### **Synopsis**

*South Korea is building a new base on Jeju Island in the Korea Strait, better known for its beach resorts and scenic landscape. This shows its need to strike a balance between its regional and global aspirations.*

### **Commentary**

NORTH KOREA'S provocative actions at sea reflects its efforts to develop a capacity to launch nuclear armed ballistic missiles from its submarines. This has alarmed its southern neighbour; and there is talk in Seoul of the need to develop an enhanced capacity to track North Korean submarines. This is to enable Seoul to deal with them pre-emptively should the need arise and, in some circles even for the country to develop its own countervailing nuclear capabilities.

But below the surface, a much quieter, less dramatic naval transformation in the Korean peninsula is going on which will in due course have its effect on the already complicated security dynamics of North East Asia. This little noticed shift is in the steady development and expansion of South Korea's blue-water capability.

### **Quiet Revolution**

It began in the 1980s and has been gradually accelerating ever since. The development faltered in 2010 with the loss of the *Cheonan* to a North Korean submarine. Critics, especially from the army, argued that the navy had been distracted from more urgent, local dangers and should focus on defence at home rather than engage in adventures overseas.

2010 was also the year of the effective foundation of Maritime Task Force Flotilla 7, the Korean navy's rapid reaction force. This force now comprises 2,500 people, three *Sejong the Great* Aegis class destroyers and six DDH 2 class destroyers, supported by elements – usually one or two Type 209 submarines from Submarine Squadron 93, together with a number of small combatants and patrol craft for local defence, a strong force of military police for the protection of the facilities, and a Marine base nearby.

It has secure dedicated communications with land-based aviation. MTF 7 moved from Busan at the end of 2015 and is now headquartered at the new naval base on Jeju Island off the southern end of the Korean peninsula, which opened in February 2016.

The force serves a variety of functions, apart from general deterrence of aggression in Korean waters as befits a force that takes the famed 'turtle ship' as its emblem. It has successfully tracked ballistic missiles fired from North Korea, assisted in the evacuation of civilians from Libya, participated in *Operation Dawn Blitz*, and ROKS *Wang Gun* i has just returned from the 21st Korean anti-piracy mission off Somalia where it operating alongside Chinese and Japanese units.

MTF7's redeployment from Busan, and the building of the base on Jeju Island in the Korea Strait to accommodate it, is strategically significant, since the move to the very southern tip of the Korean peninsula should position MTF7 for the quick response to any crisis anywhere, for which it is designed. Moreover, the comparatively narrow waters between Japan and the Republic of Korea, in the northern reaches of the East China Sea have always been of considerable strategic significance and the Island of Jeju effectively sits at the maritime crossroads of a volatile and sometimes tense region.

### **North Korea Threat and Jeju Island Base**

While the prime responsibility of the Korean Navy's 2nd fleet based at Pyong Taek remains firmly focussed on North Korea, the Navy is investing in projects like the next generation patrol ships such as the PKX jet-powered patrol ships, specifically to respond to North Korean threats.

The investment of such resource into the base on Jeju also signals that the government and navy of South Korea are not so intimidated by the pugnacious policies of its northern neighbour as to ignore the need to take account of Chinese, Japanese and Russian activities or to respond to the defence of Korean interests, direct and indirect, in a wider world.

This determination to expand South Korea's horizons from a fixation on its troublesome neighbour was also demonstrated by the size, cost and ambition behind the project to build this new base on Jeju Island. Although there was already a small naval base on the Island, Jeju was in some other respects a surprising choice for such a large project since it has long had a reputation for a kind of liberal anti-militarism.

Known for its scenic beaches and landscape, it is no coincidence that the Jeju Forum for Peace and Prosperity was established there back in 2001, and is also now a major annual event. Moreover, the Island is being given over to rapid development as Korea's tourist Mecca. Accordingly, the building of the base has been highly controversial on both environmental and pacifist grounds.

Although the base is completed, these protests continue, invigorated perhaps by the fact that the ROK Navy is seeking redress from the protesters for the spiralling of the cost of the base at three trillion won (about US\$2.5 billion). This was much higher than first envisaged, took longer to build and is a little less ambitious than anticipated.

### **Cover For Other Missions?**

Cynics argue that environmental concerns are simply a cover for the ideological position of anti-militarist pro-North Korea groups, since few of them seem to be raised in connection with the mega tourist resorts that disfigure parts of an otherwise beautiful Island. Moreover, some of the protests have come from people whose land was not bought at advantageous rates by the government!

Even so there seems no doubt that the base, and the strategic ambitions which it exemplifies are here to stay. In theory, it will be open to a degree of civilian use and for that reason is officially referred to as a civil military harbour complex, rather than simply as a naval base. It has employed large numbers of local people directly and indirectly and will continue to do so. It seems most unlikely that the government will ever 'give it back' as the protesters demand.

Though smaller than first envisaged, the base is still vast. Its piers can accommodate at least 30 major combatants and its depth – which is 15 meters at its shallowest would allow very large vessels to use it. Thus, the base will be of considerable interest to the US Navy and to South Korea's other allies and partners.

No foreign ships have yet made use of these facilities, but there is little doubt that they will, maybe for exercises in regional cooperation. In this and other ways, the new base at Jeju, and indeed the Island itself, seems set to transform from an isolated and insignificant economic backwater into one of South Korea's most important windows to the world.

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