

# JustComment

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The School of Education, Australian Catholic University

## Jeju Island: Assault on island of peace

### Background

Most Australians and Americans are unaware of **Jeju Island**, 80 kms southwest of the Korean Peninsula. Nor are they aware of the increasing its military presence in Korea, Japan, and the rest of the Pacific – including Australia by the United States. Visitors to Jeju understand why it is called a paradise as this beautiful volcanic island with its clean mountain streams and placid coral reefs has ironically been designated an island of peace<sup>1</sup>.

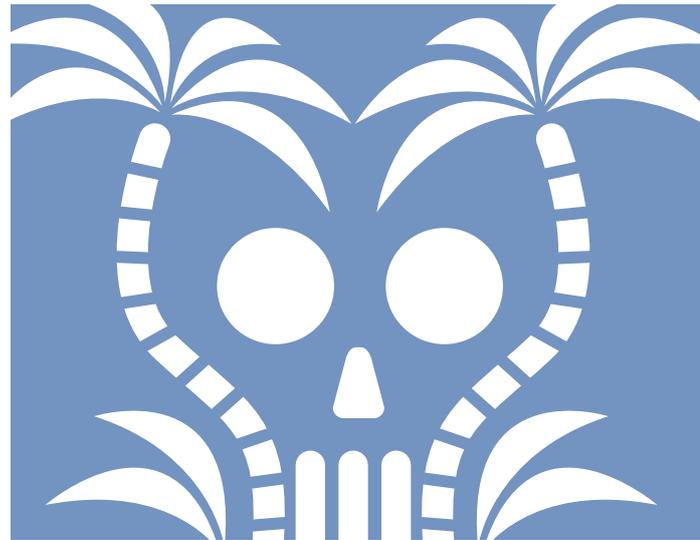
For the people of Jeju, the attempt to **nonviolently resist construction of a new naval base** has an eerie sense of déjà vu. In the small fishing and farming village of Gangjeong, this resistance represents a larger drama being played out against the forces of empire. U.S. foreign policy is undergoing a major 'pivot' to the Asia-Pacific region that already takes in Guam, Australia, Okinawa, and the Philippines. It has been called 'America's Pacific Century'<sup>2</sup>. Gangjeong is at the forefront of a U.S. strategy of increased militarisation is designed, under the pretext of defense against North Korean expansion, to counterbalance China's growing economic and military sphere of influence. This will put U.S. military might on China's doorstep!<sup>3</sup> The US has over 1000 military bases around the world, (82 in South Korea alone), and China has no significant military bases outside its borders. A naval base at Gangjeong will serve to further military tensions and be an obstacle to peace in the East Asian region<sup>4</sup>.

The **failure to prevent the base construction** could also impact the rest of the world as well as China sees such project as a threat to its national

security. What is occurring on Jeju Island is becoming one of the most critical struggles against a potentially devastating war in Asia. The island is becoming 'the spearhead of the country's defense line,' a reckless 500km from China<sup>5</sup>.

Jeju Island is home to a number of **UNESCO World Heritage sites** and other environmental and cultural special status designations. It is now to become amidst secrecy and hypocrisy, a different home: a home to warships, submarines, aircraft carriers and destroyers. As China's influence grows, the U.S. is 'rebalancing' its foreign policy toward containing that influence.

**Jeju's strategic location has been a curse** as it has been used as a springboard for the expansion of power-seeking nations. Conflicts on its soil have had little to do with the people themselves. In the 13th century, Mongolia held Jeju for 100 years as a forward base to conquer Japan. During World War II, Japan used it as a fortress island. Japan's annexation of Jeju in 1910 resulted in forced labour in mines and factories in Japan and Manchuria. Women were forced into prostitution to service the Japanese Imperial Army. When Japan surrendered in 1945, Jeju joined the rest of Korea to celebrate the end of decades of colonial rule and exploitation, but to solidify U.S. hegemony over Korea (and Northeast Asia) a 'communism containment policy' was implemented. This was one of the driving forces behind what became known as the April 3, 1948 massacre<sup>6</sup> when over 30,000 people (10% of the population) were killed in genocide.



Perpetrated by the South Korean government under U.S. military rule, 84 villages were burnt and a scorched earth policy left thousands of refugees because they refused to support the division of the peninsula into North and South, and thus were assumed to be Communists. The horrors experienced under Japanese rule were nothing compared to what occurred during the April 3 massacre – a trauma that was not permitted to be openly talked about until 2006 when the late President Roh Moo-Hyun officially apologised for the massacre and designated Jeju an 'Island of World Peace'. Jeju, having gradually restored its peaceful culture as South Korea's only autonomous province, finds that the arms race is about to intrude on that island of peace and tranquility<sup>7</sup>. This designation as 'Island of World Peace' does not begin to tell the story of history of conflict, occupation, repression and genocide<sup>8</sup>. In more recent years, with work and old wisdom, Jeju gradually restored its uniquely peaceful culture as South Korea's only autonomous province. In 2006, South Korea's president,

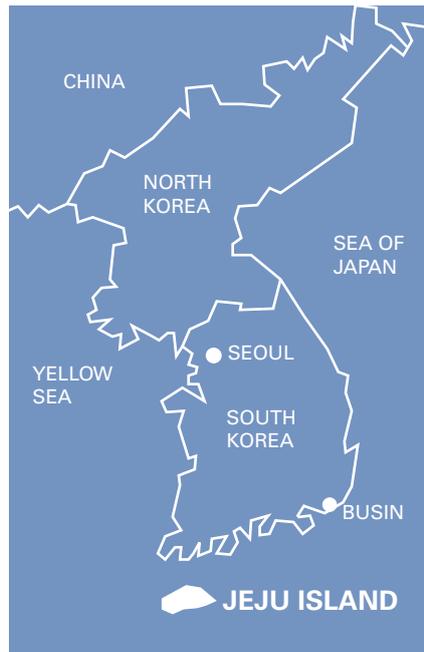
apologised for the massacre and declared Jeju the Island of Global Peace. Again, there is a great sense of betrayal when a few years later the government agrees to build a naval base there<sup>9</sup>. And as the people of the Jeju Island challenge the latest military strategy of the missile defense system, they remember vividly America's complicity in the April 3, 1948 massacre which will result in another massacre – of the natural wonders on their island<sup>10</sup>.

## Opposition

Construction of the base will contribute to **increasing military tensions** in the region. Islanders, religious leaders, and peace activists are calling attention to the dangers caused by joint U.S.-South Korean militarisation<sup>11</sup>. Conservation and civic groups, NGOs and scientists also say, as well as the destabilisation of the Korean peninsula, will imperil rare wildlife, destroy natural areas that currently enjoy special protected status and irrevocably alter local culture and livelihoods<sup>12</sup>.

**Daily protests** have been maintained despite South Korean Government statements that this 'eco-friendly' naval base will also have civilian uses such as a commercial port for tourism. But villagers remain far from satisfied and are concerned that the human and natural landscape will not be able to cope with the military<sup>13</sup>. The base will create far more problems than it will solve as China is South Korea's number one trading partner. However, the US is trying to change this pattern and has just signed a Free Trade Agreement with South Korea, despite major opposition from South Korean civil society.

**The Pentagon** is now encircling Russia (which has the world's largest supply of natural gas and significant supplies of oil) and China (a rising economic power) with missile defense systems. The US knows it cannot compete with China economically but China imports more than 60% of its oil on ships. If



the Pentagon can choke off China's ability to transport these vital resources, then it would hold the keys to China's economic engine<sup>14</sup>.

Opposition to the missile base is about the destruction of a natural habitat; it is about the establishment of another link in the chain of US military bases; but also about **a society traumatised and brutalised** by military occupation and persecution. The impressive public stand by villagers against nuclear weapons, U.S. imperialism, environmental destruction and basic injustice has led to arrests, imprisonment and denial of civil rights. Despite government attempts to keep villagers away from the proposed site, the people continue to rise up and occupy the land and use their bodies to stop construction. This impressive resistance supported by the active involvement and public leadership of priests and nuns on the island and the mainland continues<sup>15</sup>.

Arguments that the base will provide vital security for the island, the presence of a major military force has always led to **death, displacement, and destruction of the local population** – atrocities committed by

the Japanese and later South Koreans themselves. The real issue here is not Jeju's security but the strategic placement of a new naval base tasked with securing shipping lanes which are the lifeline of South Korea's resource intensive corporations and take an increasingly offensive role in the East China and South China Sea.

Conservationists fear that that the docks and naval base will cause **irreversible environmental damage**, with leaked pollutants and construction projects, as also occurred to the naval bases in Pearl Harbor, Hawaii and Okinawa, Japan and Guam where once pristine environments became into ecological nightmares.

The worst fear today is that the lessons of history will be forgotten. The people have an inescapable sense of history<sup>16</sup>.

## Conclusion

Though the full force of state power has been used to crackdown and literally beat the resistance into submission, the authorities have **severely underestimated the steely nature of the villagers and peace activists**. Clearly, the current doubling of U.S. military operations in the Asia-Pacific region will have severe implications for people who live there – and for world peace. Apart from the impact on the environment and ecology which will be caused by the construction of the naval base, the social impact goes far beyond that of being just a local problem.

The people of Jeju have like millions of people around the world found themselves on the front line of the struggle against empire, greed and militarism. They have been traumatised and brutalised but their actions, their resistance, are a sign of hope. Though often unrecognised, it is important now that their **actions of hope, their courage and resistance be recognised and supported**.

Full set of resources and references are on the ERC website [www.erc.org.au](http://www.erc.org.au)



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