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Euan, Graham

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South Korea's Maritime Challenges: Between a Rock and a Hard Base

By Euan Graham

Synopsis

South Korea's navy faces major domestic as well as external challenges - not only from North Korea. While domestic opposition still overhangs the construction of a new base on Jeju island, Seoul-Beijing diplomatic strains are meanwhile playing out in a lesser known East China Sea boundary dispute.

Commentary

SOUTH KOREA has recently faced pressure from two different sorts of maritime challenges - even as its navy prepares for the overriding problem posed by North Korea's impending rocket launch and other 'asymmetric' contingencies around the Peninsula. In early March, maritime tensions rose with Beijing following reports that the head of China's State Oceanic Administration had ordered surveillance vessels and aircraft to monitor maritime traffic near a submerged rock within the East China Sea, where the two countries' Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ) overlap.

The underwater feature, previously known as Socotra Rock, and claimed by South Korea as leodo, lies around 150 km from South Korea's closest island, Marado, southwest of Jeju Island. China has reportedly claimed jurisdiction in the area since 2006, although the feature is somewhat closer to South Korea.

Emerging tension with China

The South Korean government first attached a warning beacon to the feature, barely four metres under water, in the late 1980s, as a precaution against a navigational hazard. Construction was stepped up significantly in the late 1990s and since 2001 the feature has supported an artificial platform, helipad included, which Seoul describes as an ocean research station.

The South Korean government claims that the rock falls within its EEZ, as defined by a median line equidistant from China, and further considers it part of Korea's continental shelf. Under the United Nations Convention for the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), however, there is no basis for claiming sovereignty over a permanently submerged feature, or for it to generate either a territorial sea or jurisdictional zones.

In early March, China's ambassador to Seoul was called in to clarify Beijing's position. On South Korea's part, President Lee Myung-bak's reported comments delivered a somewhat mixed message: on one hand, he denied that there was any territorial dispute over the feature; on the other, he was also quoted by Korean media as

saying that “I believe leodo will be recognised as being under our sovereignty if the government discusses the matter with China”. A claim of sovereignty would not be supportable under UNCLOS. This has some potential to engender a counter territorial claim from Beijing, or otherwise complicate the existing bilateral maritime boundary dispute.

Raising the ante?

What explains this raising of the rhetorical ante on both sides? The unresolved EEZ delimitation between China and South Korea has been an issue in the past, but tensions have been heightened since last December when two South Korean Coast Guard officers were stabbed, allegedly by Chinese fishermen operating within the EEZ claimed by Seoul. One later died of his injuries.

Bilateral relations have deteriorated since 2010, over what Seoul perceives as China’s unflinching diplomatic support for North Korea despite a pattern of provocation from the North. Furthermore, South Korea, in common with other states along China’s maritime periphery, has viewed a more assertive China, backed by growing naval and paramilitary capabilities, with increasing apprehension.

In the wake of December’s incident, Korean media reported that China would despatch its largest civilian patrol ship to the disputed area, prompting calls to beef up South Korea’s Coast Guard. Meanwhile, the proximity to Korea of China’s fledgling aircraft carrier, based at Dalian, has sharpened naval threat perceptions and the accompanying dilemma of whether to continue investing in ‘high-end’ blue water naval platforms. The ability of South Korea’s navy to defend coastal and offshore areas has been severely tested by North Korea’s effective use of asymmetric force in 2010.

The Korean navy also faces challenges from within. There is political opposition to the construction of a major naval base on Jeju island, not to mention conservatism from a defence establishment that remains army-dominated. Commensurate with its blue water ambitions, the Korean navy has pushed – ambitiously - for the acquisition of a base on the island, since Jeju offers unrivalled access to open water and sea lines of communication along the western Pacific. Construction began in March on a 480,000 square-metre facility, to provide extensive berthing facilities, including for the navy’s Aegis guided missile destroyers and possibly submarines. The government plans to complete the base by 2015.

Local resistance

While Jeju offers a strategically advantageous position in the East China Sea - a point also of future potential interest to the US Navy - the project has encountered significant local resistance. The island’s relations to the mainland are akin to those of Okinawa in Japan and just as complicated; anti-military sentiment is ingrained and there is deep concern about the environmental impact of the base. MPs from the main opposition party, which is hoping to win the presidency in December’s elections, have picked up the cause, going so far as to label the project a “pirate base”.

Further complicating the navy’s position, important defence reforms are pending in parliament. New legislation could impel the navy to reprioritise towards coastal defence, at the expense of other ‘blue water’ missions.

At a time when South Korea faces a widening spectrum of external maritime challenges to its security, the navy’s future blue water development could be a casualty of the politicisation of the Jeju base construction. With this hurdle in mind, increased public awareness of maritime tensions with China may actually work to the navy’s advantage in overcoming its more immediate domestic challenges.

Euan Graham is a Senior Fellow in the Maritime Security Programme at the S Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University and an Associate Fellow at the Royal United Services Institute.