

# REVIEW

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## **THE FORGOTTEN ISLANDS**

Okinawa and Jeju: Bases of Discontent

*Scott Kardas*

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Donald Kirk, *Okinawa and Jeju: Bases of Discontent* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); 148 pages; \$75.00 (hardback).

Okinawa and Jeju. Two islands with a military past, present, and future. They are often viewed in the broader geopolitical context of East Asia but never really compared for their shared identities. However, Donald Kirk has woven the stories of these islands together, illustrating the unique connection between the two in *Okinawa and Jeju: Bases of Discontent*. Neither purely touting the anti-military approach nor defending the necessity of the military bases, Kirk attempts to present a neutral stance regarding the bases. While the book somewhat sympathizes with the islanders' situation, the reader can navigate the presented information and formulate his or her own opinion on the subject. The topic of placement and effects of military bases, especially non-native ones, is only occasionally debated in national and international circles. As such, this book brings the issue to the forefront for these oft forgotten islands.

Rather than approaching the topic in a broad overview, Kirk focuses on the people. He brings the issue to a personal level, incorporating several interviews and anecdotal accounts. Kirk does not merely rely on a few interviews; instead, he seeks a diverse representation to present the issue from various angles. Similar to Barbara Tuchman's *The Guns of August*, this book employs a style of focusing on smaller actors in a large play to give a much deeper connection. While the theme of connection between Okinawa and Jeju resonates in each chapter, disconnect contrasts this atmosphere and builds upon the problems of distrust and misunderstanding. A cursory glance reveals the obvious connection theme of shared island mentality and the disconnect theme of distrust of the central government. Yet, Kirk unwittingly uncovers how these two issues feed into the greater theme of disconnect shared by both Okinawa and Jeju residents: failing to connect with the larger picture.

Jeju's and Okinawa's historical experiences have shaped the similar island mentalities. Both islands suffer from a painful war memory that they wish to supplant with peace rather than to ignore. Yet, residents on both

islands harbor conflicting viewpoints towards the military bases. On the one hand, residents disapprove the stationing of large groups of soldiers in their communities. Whether it is noise levels, crime, accidents, or environmental degradation, the bases ruin the preferred peaceful way of life. On the other hand, some residents understand the bases' contribution to their local economies. In one of the interviews in Okinawa, several bar owners resent the trouble caused by the soldiers but also appreciate the source of income from the soldiers. They vacillate between preferring the strict rules imposed on soldiers to resenting the rules since they drain their profits. Bringing in over 600 billion yen, the bases provide Okinawa with economic benefits, such as tourism, local employment, and land rentals. Furthermore, the Japanese government invests in infrastructure projects in anticipation for future bases.

While many locals appreciate the economic benefits, this has not stopped them from protesting. The style of protesting differs as well. The South Korean protests rely on direct but non-violent tactics by blocking ships and trucks and interfering with construction activity. While a constant presence, the Okinawan protests employ signs, petitions, and statements. This does not diminish the protests, but Kirk illustrates a striking contrast between the two groups. The differences may stem from the main targets: Jeju residents against their own government, and Okinawan residents against the US government. It also may be a result of the time frame. The Jeju base is a more recent issue, but the Okinawan bases have been there for decades. Regardless of protest forms, residents on both islands remain discontented.

Another similarity between the islands is the growing distance between the island and the mainland. Kirk illustrates this disconnect through historical references and current government policies. Accusing the government of ignoring their voices, the islanders often portray the government as a foreign entity who has encroached upon their lands. And the islanders have a valid argument. In addition to the Jeju 4/3 massacre's delayed acknowledgement by the South Korean government, the proposals for the military base were perfunctorily explained to the locals before resistance could be mustered. Furthermore, the protestors accuse the United States of pressuring the domestic government. The base construction protests ring similar to the current protests against THAAD deployment. Banners exclaiming "Yankee go home" are rather commonplace, and both protests cite media control and US interference. While this book was written in 2013, it is interesting to note the similarities.

The disconnect continues in Okinawa, often along racial lines. Not only did the Japanese government fail to protect Okinawa residents from American forces during the war, but it also reneged on its agreement to close the military base. The Japanese government ignores residents' demands for noise regulations and safety standards. In reference to the deadly military aircraft crash at an elementary school, many residents continue to fear for their safety. Thus, historical grievances seep into the present, solidifying future disconnect between the local people and the central government.

Even though many residents want the bases removed, they nobly do not wish to transfer the burden upon another territory. Moving beyond "not in my backyard" towards "not in anyone's backyard," these island residents understand the hardships of base life and do not want anyone else to experience them. Even if the bases are removed from their present location, they can easily be relocated to another region, which contradicts residents' pacifist outlook. The islanders' strong sense of moral responsibility persuades the reader to support their position.

These previous descriptions further humanize the narrative of security dilemma facing East Asian countries. Kirk aptly secures the readers' sympathy towards the innocent islanders who suffer the consequences of governments' power politics and thus are justified in protesting the bases. From the protestors' perspective, the bases are not needed since neighboring countries, such as China and North Korea, do not pose a threat. However, since they have a base, the islands will be the first target in case of an attack. So, does the presence of the base elicit a threat, or has the threat always been there? This chicken or the egg dilemma stems from the disconnect with the broader security picture that is overlooked in this book.

If the threat has always been present, then the protestors should not be challenging the government's argument for deterrence. Consequently, if the islanders truly do not wish the hardship of military base life on others, are they being selfish if they do not worry about the threat their country faces? While I do not wish to be cynical in suggesting the islanders should bear this burden, the protestors have, in a sense, created their own island of reality. As they distance themselves from the government, as they remember their personal historical grievances, and as they look at the inward consequences of military arrangements, they ignore the external dimensions of a complex security arrangement. While Kirk does not have an ulterior motive by focusing on the personal stories, the islanders' pacifist narrative only works when one ignores the broader security picture.

Although examination of security issues would strengthen Kirk's argument, it does not detract from the purpose of the book. Kirk focuses on the comparison between the two islands rather than an explanation for the military bases. A concentrated approach keeps the book concise and direct. Even though Kirk did not widen the scope of examination, the book points to foreign powers' interference in local matters as one of the main sources of the problem. Therefore, he maintains a succinct argument within the boundaries of his analysis.

Kirk's comparisons between Okinawa and Jeju are both original and relevant. The research depth and the style of using smaller situations to examine the bigger picture allow the reader to comprehend the situation easily and to form a personal connection. Furthermore, the resounding themes of connect and disconnect intertwined throughout each chapter present a cohesive story. This unique comparison is especially pertinent to the current global power shifts and political situation in East Asia.