Modelling the Port of Gunsan’s Potential: Echoes of the Japanese ‘Construction State’?*

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Abstract

Three models are used to explore the potential of the Port of Gunsan in North Jeolla Province (Jeollabuk-do): the Anyport Model which examines the Port’s internal development; the universal port patterns model to compare Gunsan with the leading Korean ports of Busan and Gwangyang; and the global-local framework to explore the relationship between transnational corporations and public service officials in a port context. While these models highlight different aspects of the Port of Gunsan’s development, there is a pressing need to see it in a political economy context, particularly as the Port is now closely associated with the recasting of the Saemangeum project. The models allow the drawing of parallels between Korean proposed mega-infrastructure developments and the Japanese ‘construction state.’

Keywords: Anyport, Global, Gunsan, Japan, Local, Port, Public Service Officials, Saemangeum, Transnational Corporations

I. Introduction

North Jeolla Province’s government seeks to stem a continuous decline in population from 2.4 million in 1975 to less than 1.8 million in 2005 (KNSO, 1955-). Its emphasis is now on reinvigorating the provincial economy to boost its 2007 share of Gross Regional Domestic Product, which has declined to 3 per cent of South Korea’s total based on current prices compared with 3.5 per cent in 1990 (KNSO, 1955-). As one of South Korea’s poorest provinces, both national and provincial governments are placing

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much stress upon attracting foreign investors into the automobile, biological, renewable energy, tourism, and logistics industries. A key role in this process has been afforded the Port of Gunsan, located 270 km southwest of Seoul.²

The Port’s prospects were fortified by the central government’s 1995 decision to designate Gunsan New Port as one of nine port development projects in a fifteen-year program due for completion in 2011. Apart from the three ‘national big port projects’ in Busan, Gwangyang and Pyeongtaek, Gunsan New Port was listed with Boryeong, North Incheon, Mokpo, Pohang and Ulsan as one of six ‘new port projects.’ Although the planned developments are far from complete, in 2008 a further fillip to the construction lobby was given by the Lee Myung-bak administration’s choice of Saemangeum-Gunsan as one of three new Free Economic Zones (FEZ) projects, along with the Yellow Sea zone (Pyeongtaek-Dangjin) and Daegu-North Gyeongsang Province (Gyeongsangbuk-do), to augment the three existing FEZs in Busan-Jinhae, Gwangyang and Incheon designated in 2003. All three new FEZs are being developed as test-beds for corporate deregulation to revive the sluggish domestic economy and stimulate renewed foreign company interest in the Republic of Korea (ROK).

Additionally, the 400 sq km Saemangeum-Gunsan project built on wetlands between 1991 and 2006, ostensibly for agricultural use, has been recast (Han, 2008). During 2007 party leaders variously saw the world’s largest landfill site being revamped for 100 golf courses (Rhyu Si-min), a giant flower market (Chung Dong-young), a city the size of Shanghai (Chough Soon-hyung), and a Dubai prototype offering a free economic zone (Lee Myun-bak). Following Lee’s electoral success, the Presidential Committee on Balanced National Development added its imprimatur to his proposition by suggesting that the area should not only be focused on food production but also on maritime tourism and other projects (AN, 2008). The Saemangeum-Gunsan project has also been ‘rebadged’ as a center for future industries and leisure-recreational purposes that are specifically linked to further port development in an area eight times larger than the famous Palm Deira [Palm Islands] under construction in Dubai. In addition, theme parks, a Formula 1 racetrack and even a spaceport are mentioned in future master plans commissioned by the central government (Vandyck, 2008).³ North Jeolla Province’s government is seeking to complement the central government’s initiatives with new harbors, a sea park, and a brand new international airport or, at least, a renovated domestic one.

A major problem in assessing the seaport’s prospects is that scholars have studiously ignored Gunsan, primarily because of difficulties in obtaining current data on flows, modes and nodes with which to base an analysis using quantified methods. Consequently, there are few published studies for interested parties to use in charting the Port of Gunsan’s future development. Most scholarly attention in South Korea has been focused on

¹ Population figures from the Korea Statistical Year Book and provincial sources differ, although both show a downward trend (KNSO, 1955-).
² Gunsan was previously spelt Kunsan.
³ Rotterdam’s Berlage Institute, together with Columbia University, the European University of Madrid, London Metropolitan University, Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), the Tokyo Institute of Technology, and Yonsei University, has been invited by the ROK Government to participate in an international competition to develop a future master plan for the Saemangeum region. The Government reserves the right to choose one of the proposals, combine them, or reject them.
the two major container ports of Busan and Gwangyang but, following the upsurge in trade with China, there has been an additional focus on Incheon. On occasions, interest has been extended to regional ports with industrial complexes, notably Pohang, Ulsan and Pyeongtaek-Daesan. Invariably, Gunsan, together with Mokpo and Masan, has been relegated to the ‘other’ category of ports, which has attracted little attention.

This situation highlights the need to discuss ports such as Gunsan so that their future potential can be evaluated, particularly given its close association with the recast Saemangeum project. A series of key issues are raised: how has the Port of Gunsan’s internal development changed over time; how should Gunsan’s role in universal port patterns be seen; and how should current stakeholders in Gunsan be conceptualized?

No one model can reveal all aspects of the Port of Gunsan’s future potential. The strategy pursued here is to select and apply three separate models in a bid to examine different aspects of Gunsan’s port activities to ascertain if, and under what conditions, the port can contribute to the future of North Jeolla Province in which it is embedded.

The first model chosen is ‘Anyport’ that can be used to study the internal port development of Gunsan; the second model of universal port patterns is designed to accommodate developments in both maritime and landside logistics and make use of available statistical material; and the third model—the global-local framework—seeks to better explain the role of key stakeholders.

While these models will reveal the specifics of the Port of Gunsan’s situation, there is a much wider issue to be addressed in the conclusion, namely whether the South Korean government’s policy reflected in Gunsan is echoing that of the Japanese ‘construction state’ (doken kokka) in which government puts more investment into public works than is realistically justified by public need (Broadbent, 2002: 43; McCormack, 2001). The issue’s significance is underlined by construction’s share of gross domestic product (GDP) within Korea being 9.3 per cent in 2005 compared with 6.3 per cent in Japan (KNSO, 1955-; NTK, 1955-).

II. ‘Anyport’

Anyport is a framework devised by James Bird (1963) for studying intra-port development and competition. As shown in Figure 1, this model identifies three phases in port development: the original setting, expansion and specialization.

Within this three-phase framework five stages are noted: (1) the original setting; (2) expansion involving additional facilities adjacent to or opposite to the original setting; (3) further expansion with the creation of newer facilities seeking deeper water downstream; (4) specialization involving further expansion downstream and (5) the redevelopment of the original port. The utility of applying the model to the Port of Gunsan is that all five stages are reflected in its historical development (Figure 2).

1. Setting

Gunsan, known as Gibeolpo (lit. ‘downstream’) was established when the Baek-
jae period was at its zenith in the fourth century AD (see Gunsan Shi, 2004, for historical maps and photographs). Since then Gunsan has had a long history as a gateway for contact and trade with both China and Japan. The original port was located on the fertile Honam Plains along the estuary of Geum River upstream from its exit into the Yellow Sea on Korea’s west coast (MOMAF, 2007). A significant obstacle to shipping has been the Yellow Sea’s great tidal range. Nevertheless, on 1 May 1899 an interna-

**Figure 1: Bird’s Anyport Model**

![Bird’s Anyport Model](source.png)

*Source: Based on Rodrique, n.d.*

**Figure 2: The Port of Gunsan, 2007. Figures refer to the stages of the Anyport**

![The Port of Gunsan, 2007](source2.png)

*Model: (1) the original setting; (2) expansion; (3) further expansion; (4) specialization involving further expansion downstream; and (5) redevelopment of the original port.*
tional port was opened to export rice to Japan.

During the Japanese colonial period (1910-1945) Gunsan, together with Mokpo, continued as a gateway for exporting rice from its agricultural hinterland to Japan. In 1913 the railway was opened and in 1923 the Japanese developed the Kunsan airbase on the area’s tidal flats (GC, 2008). By the 1930s the Japanese had commenced the construction of Gunsan’s Inner Harbor, comprising three floating piers to help overcome the handicap of the Yellow Sea’s great tidal range and maintain the supply of cheap rice to Japan.

2. Expansion and Further Expansion

The initial phase of expansion was formulated in 1938 when the Japanese developed the Janghang port plan on the opposite side of the river from the Inner Harbor as part of its infrastructural development program (MOMAF, 2007). After liberation from the Japanese in 1945 progress on Janghang port was slow, despite Gunsan being largely unscathed by the devastation of the Korean War (1950-53), and the boost to the local economy from the United States Air Force occupying the Kunsan air base vacated by the colonial power. Rather than follow the Japanese lead in shifting port activities, the Inner Harbor was enlarged in 1958 to accommodate ships with a 3,000-8,000 dwt capacity.

In 1974 the limitations of the Inner Harbor prompted Anyport’s next expansion stage when a 20-Year Plan was promulgated to construct an outer port on the same side of the Geum River as the Inner Harbor but downstream, which was a very minute part of a much larger development program pursued under the military dictatorship of Park Chung Hee (MOMAF, 2007). In 1979 Pier No. 1 was constructed with a depth of 9-11 m and the Inner Harbor downgraded.

Further expansion was promised in 1990 with the onset of a more democratic regime when the downstream Gun-Jang New Port (1990-2011) Development Plan was introduced (MOMAF, 2007). In 1990 Pier No. 2 was completed at the Outer Port with a depth of 11 meters; Pier 3 with a similar depth was finished five years later. Major industrial facilities were attracted to the site with the Gunsan Seaside Industrial Complex and the Gunsan National Industrial Complex being located west of the city adjacent to the Gun-Jang Port (GC, 2008). In 1996 Daewoo Motors commenced assembling automobiles in the industrial zone, which led to the associated development of Daewoo Heavy Industries plant a year later.

3. Specialization and Reconversion

Gunsan entered Anyport’s specialization phase in 1997 when Pier 4, offering 11 m depths, was dedicated to handle automobiles produced by Daewoo (MOMAF, 2007). This initiative coincided with the economic crisis of the later 1990s and near collapse of the South Korean economy but the developmental projects were soon revived in Gunsan. In 2000 Phase 1 of the South Quay project also with 11 m depth was constructed offering six specialized berths for automobile, pulp, container and miscellaneous products. In 2002, when Daewoo was taken over by General Motors, the annual production these berths were ready for the export of 300,000 units of the Magnus and Daewoo Lacetti
and Kalos (Suzuki/Chevrolet) (GC, 2008). In the process the plant became part of General Motor’s global supply chain.

In 2003 Phase II of the South Quay project with depths of between 11 meters and 13 meters offered six specialized berths for containers and grain (MOMAF, 2007). In 2004 these berths were ready to accommodate the activities of Tata Motors when the company, with headquarters in India, took over the Daewoo Heavy Industries plant. Berths were also constructed to cater for niche markets associated with the China trade: the cement pier for Ssangyong and the silica pier for Hangkuk Glass. Dedicated oil piers were also provided for Hyundai Oil, SsangYong Oil, LG Caltex and SK Shipping.

There are plans for developing further specialized port activities outside the Geum River as part of the Saemangeum land reclamation and development project, originally conceived in 1975. Implemented by the Roh Tae-woo administration in 1987, the 400 sq km project costing 2.4 trillion won (US$2.6 billion) was not completed until 2006. Despite the opposition of conservationists, the 33 kilometres seawall was designed to enclose the wetlands habitat of migratory birds into 28,300 ha of farmland and an 11,800 ha freshwater reservoir. Under the outgoing Roh Moo-hyun administration, 70 per cent of this recovered land was to be devoted to farming.

In 2008 the proportion devoted to agriculture has been reduced to 30 per cent under the incoming Lee Myun-bak administration’s development plan to be completed by 2020, ten years earlier than promised by his predecessor. As noted, the bulk of the land will now be devoted to the so-called ‘Dubai Plan’ aimed at creating a major international financial, logistics and tourist hub. An integral part of this business-friendly zone for international trade will be the New Shipping Port. Presumably, this will replace harbor developments beyond the north breakwater that appeared in an earlier master plan for the Port of Gunsan (Bang, 2008). The new port will offer 20 m depths and be capable of handling 330,000 ton ships, together with a new logistics complex covering 2,010 ha and catering for exports, processing, and the distribution of transhipped cargoes.

On completion, the logistics base is designed to take advantage of China’s growing economy, which currently suffers from inadequate logistics facilities. In particular, a connection with the Caofeidian industrial district situated between Tianjin and Jingtang ports in China is envisaged. Meanwhile, Anyport’s fifth stage has been reached with Gunsan’s original Inner Harbor being redeveloped to accommodate specialized recreational use with a water amusement park planned (MOMAF, 2007).

The Anyport model is useful in highlighting that the development blueprint in Korea is long standing, having being pursued under colonial, military and democratic regimes. However, the Anyport model is limited in its application as the dynamics of comparative advantage are not within the Port of Gunsan itself. Consequently, there is a need to study ‘universal’ port patterns to highlight that in reality there are only a few very large and many small ports, before considering the degree to which South Korea’s path of development mimics that of the Japanese ‘construction state.’

III. Universal Port Patterns

Essentially ports are hubs in networks-connected webs that are not strictly hier-
archical because direct links connect both large and small ports. As shown in the universal model of port patterns in Figure 3, it is feasible for ports to pass through five phases: scattered ports; penetration lines and port piracy; interconnections and concentration; centralization; deconcentration and decentralization (Rimmer, 2007).

Figure 3: Universal port patterns: Gunsan is in phase 4, and Busan and the offshore port of Gwangyang are in phase 5

Our interest here is focused on phases 4 and 5. Gunsan (P4) is still locked in the centralization phase of phase 4 as the port has received little benefit from containerization. Further, key features of Phase 5 have by-passed Gunsan: the port has not experienced Busan’s deconcentration and decentralization (i.e. moving landside activities beyond the port area) prompted by later generations of larger container vessels; and the port has not seen development of an offshore hub such as Gwangyang.

One advantage that the Port of Gunsan does have is its proximity to China. After
1990 it was in a position to benefit from the cold war some fifteen years after the Iri Free Trade Zone was opened (Rimmer, 1995). Yet in 1991 Busan still accounted for over two-thirds of South Korea’s total trade. Reflecting the southeast orientation of the economy, the collective figure for the three West Coast ports was slightly more than one-tenth-Incheon (9.8 per cent), Pyeongtaek (0.4 per cent) and Gunsan (0.3 per cent) (Lee and Rodrigue, 2006).

Gunsan and other West Coast ports had to await developments during the later 1990s that saw the rise of China’s Yellow Sea Rim ports and increased transhipments through their facilities. In 1994 Gunsan, in particular, benefited from the opening of the ferry to Yantai in Shandong province.

Gunsan’s subsequent faster growth than larger ports reflects that the changes were independent of rank and size (i.e. scale free); random factors were also important, particularly investment. However, Gunsan is subject to greater fluctuations in cargo throughput than larger ports due to smaller markets and a smaller consumer base because of the lack of diversification within the local economy.

Gunsan has attracted fewer regular trans- Yellow Sea container services than its main West Coast rivals. While in 2007 Incheon had almost 13 per cent of South Korea’s total revenue tonnes and Pyeongtaek-Daesang over 9 per cent, Gunsan had less than 2 per cent. Only Mokpo (1 per cent) had a smaller share (Bang, 2008).

This dissipation of trade to smaller ports is less obvious when containers are examined. Busan still has almost four-fifths of the container traffic and Gwangyang one-tenth. Although Busan has scaled back on some plans and Gwangyang is offering incentives, Gunsan is still included in the ‘other’ category. However it is not helpful to make a distinction between ‘regional ports’ and ‘main ports’ because they are all part of one network; specialized car carriers using the Port of Gunsan, for instance, have direct links to West-Coast North America.

Knowledge about universal port patterns, rankings and Asian port ranges is still an insufficient basis on which to predict Gunsan’s evolution in a port system known for its volatility and instability. There is a need to take account of the global-local context. Local governance relating to decisions that define expectations, grant power or verify performance and a whole range of factors involving leadership or management processes need to be considered to explain Gunsan’s unpredictable evolution and the importance of historical effects. More particularly, there is a pressing need to explain the role of Gunsan’s stakeholders before considering aspects of the Lee Myun-bak administration’s development agenda aimed at fulfilling the ‘747’ pledge—7 percent growth, per capita income of $40,000 in a decade, and making South Korea the world’s seventh-largest economy (ECC, 2008).

IV. Global-Local Framework

Governance has the capacity to reduce risks and uncertainties by creating new links, markets and roles, but, in turn, may trigger new fluctuations and interplays between stakeholders. Often this situation stems from the disconnection between transnational corporations (TNCs) operating at the global level and central and provincial gov-
As smaller ports may be vulnerable to the actions of TNCs a framework was developed for discussing the locus of power between international firms and different levels of the South Korean government (Fig. 4). Within this framework TNCs and PSOs come together in port complexes. Their inter-connection is no longer direct as TNCs generally outsource their shipping needs to Liner Shipping Companies (LSOs) that, in turn, link the global-local port complexes. Also the PSOs, responsible for governance and operation of the port complexes, are increasingly working at arm’s length because they have ceded logistics operations to Terminal Operating Corporations (TOCs) by negotiating a mutual local-global connection.

**Figure 4: The global-local framework is designed to examine the interrelationships between transnational corporations and public service officials in a port context**

This framework for exploring global-local tensions in Gunsan is largely inapplicable because the dominant pro-growth, urban coalition of national and local bureaucrats and vested interests in Gunsan-consultants, lobby groups and media-are only too willing to accommodate the express needs of TNCs. Local autonomy is weak due to the control exercised by the central government and lack of access to independent resources. There is no strong emphasis on growing the economy through smaller developments supported by community incentives (Kim, 2007). A “green” political movement stressing ecological and environmental goals and their achievement through broad-based participatory democracy is not well established in North Jeolla Province.

After almost four decades of neglect and discrimination, often due to their reputation for dissidence, local people are still very much in a mendicant position. Even if
projects are not based on transparent decision-making procedures, they welcome any growth prospects offered by public service officials to redress the province’s parlous economic base. North Jeolla Province’s reliance on Seoul for its growth prospects has striking similarities with Okinawa, which is heavily dependent on Tokyo’s largesse for construction projects (McCormack, 2004).

Further, PSOs in second-tier ports such as Gunsan do not have the same opportunity to develop alliances with maritime corporations unlike the first-tier ports and their associated TOCs, for example Busan and DP World (based in Dubai), Gwangyang and the Danish-owned Maersk Line, and Incheon and PSA (Port of Singapore Authority). Nevertheless, Gunsan is being promoted as a logistics centre port driven by the developmental policies of a coalition of national and local bureaucrats. This proposed logistics project offers a neat fit with Free Trade Zone developments and a strategy that differs from the emphasis of first-tier ports on transhipments, such as Busan and Gwangyang, and specialist ports engaged in direct import/exports like Ulsan.

The aim of PSOs in promoting the Gunsan Free Trade Zone is to increase Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) and make use of the port’s efficient transport infrastructure, land availability and potential to be an economic bridge to Yellow Sea Rim’s ports. In 2004 Gunsan Free Trade Zone was completed within the Gunsan National Industrial Complex (NIC) covering an area of 1,029 thou. sq. meters (GC, 2008). By 2007 the Gunsan Port Free Trade Zone was also finished within the Complex covering a further 1,019 thou. sq. meters. Once the contemplated Gunsan-Saemangeum logistics zone is in operation it is hoped that the necessity for exporting parts for finishing and their reimport would be avoided. In considering this process any fears of overcapacity in South Korea’s port development, particularly with the expansion of China’s ports, and questions about who pays for intensified domestic port competition, are at best muted or simply ignored.

V. Conclusion: Echoes…?

This study has applied a variety of approaches to explore the Port of Gunsan’s potential. The Anyport model offered a descriptive account, the universal port patterns model provided a useful yardstick, and the global-local framework discussed two key stakeholders—the public service officials and the transnational corporations. Thus, the remaining task is to determine and assess Gunsan’s involvement in future trends in Korean port dynamics covering inter-port competitiveness, cooperation and the hybrid possibility of ‘co-opetition’ and its likely impact upon the development of the lagging North Jeolla Province.

In the shorter term the Port of Gunsan may be better off concentrating on its advantages. Gunsan may be in a more superior geographical position as a logistics centre for the China trade than either Busan or Gwangyang. Moreover, transhipments from

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4 My own observation is that the depopulation of the North Jeolla Province’s has similarities with the West of Ireland. Since 1973 the region has been revived through the considerable economic benefits from Ireland’s entry into the European Union.
China via Busan and Gwangyang will experience slower growth rates with the development of China’s own container ports (e.g. Yangshan in Shanghai and Ningbo). Yet, inevitably, these logistics developments in China will also impact on Gunsan’s potential, particularly as the Port does not have sufficient capacity to compete with its Chinese counterparts (Rimmer and Comtois, 2008).

Consequently, extravagant claims that the New Port is destined to be the new Rotterdam or that the prestigious Saemangeun-Gunsan reclamation project will be the new ‘Dubai of Northeast Asia’ raise scepticism. Despite the prospect of Dar Al Salam, a Saudi Arabian property development firm, investing US$8 billion at the landfill site, it is difficult to imagine the revamped project succeeding against the Incheon FEZ and the Pyeongtaek-Daesang FEZ that are both closer to the National Capital Region, let alone matching coastal China’s burgeoning industrial and logistics sites (SC, 2008).

In understanding the Port of Gunsan’s prospects we need to: firstly comprehend global production-distribution networks built upon logistics (e.g. GM Daewoo); and secondly explore synergies between the supply chain and the transport network. Further, in considering the future of North Jeolla Province, there is a need to look beyond the Port of Gunsan and consider air transport, especially given the prospect of a new airport, and the widening impact of developments in telecommunications.

A research agenda is required for North Jeolla Province, which adopts a structuralist approach centering on (a) flows; (b) modes; (c) nodes (i.e. gateways) and (d) the way in which these are bound together in a ‘network of networks.’ If the potential of these network synergies are recognized, the costs and benefits of the development of Gunsan as a logistics distribution center can be determined. Then an institutionalist perspective can be added to highlight the roles of business (money) and government (political power).

This wider focus suggests that research on Gunsan and North Jeolla Province cannot be undertaken in isolation. It must be part of a wider national study that considers the extent to which huge government infrastructure projects such as the development of Gunsan port are crucial to boosting the South Korean economy’s potential growth capacity. Not only has the current administration added the Saemangeum-Gunsan plus two other FEZs and the Seoul-Busan Canal (Kyongbu Unha) Project to the national construction agenda but also has inherited those from the outgoing Roh Moo-hyun administration designed to create a better regional balance (Han, 2008). The project list includes the ‘Multifunctional Administrative City’, ten ‘Innovation’ cities, six ‘Enterprise’ cities, ten new towns in the capital region, three FEZs and a new replacement for the Seoul headquarters of the United States’ military forces in South Korea. As the total cost of the new and inherited set of projects is an estimated W230 trillion, the inevitable conclusion is that South Korea is still a strong developmental state and the people’s appetite for further regional economic growth and development is far from being satiated, although some residents of North Jeolla Province must by now be tired of broken promises from successive administrations (SC, 2008).

Inevitably, issues need to be raised about the environmental footprint of the construction agenda, which suggests that the models discussed here should ultimately also be embedded in a political economy context to identify inter-relationships between a wider set of stakeholders than has been possible here. Apart from a few landowners, the
Prime beneficiaries of further port and other infrastructure developments are likely to be the construction companies, national and local politicians, and financial institutions.

Reference can then be made to parallels with the regional initiatives of the Japanese ‘construction state’, which over six decades since the end of the Pacific War has switched emphasis from Tennessee Valley type river-basin schemes, through industrial complexes and technopolises to leisure resorts (Rimmer, 2005). These construction-based initiatives have parallels in South Korea’s comprehensive national territorial planning for the period between 2000 and 2020 (ROK, 2002). Pursuing this comparison should spark a debate on how South Korea’s ‘new digital economy’, marked by high-speed information transfer and an emphasis on ideas, conservation and sustainability, inter-meshes with developmentalist policies focused on mega-infrastructure port and harbor projects for boosting provincial economic growth. Let the debate begin!

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