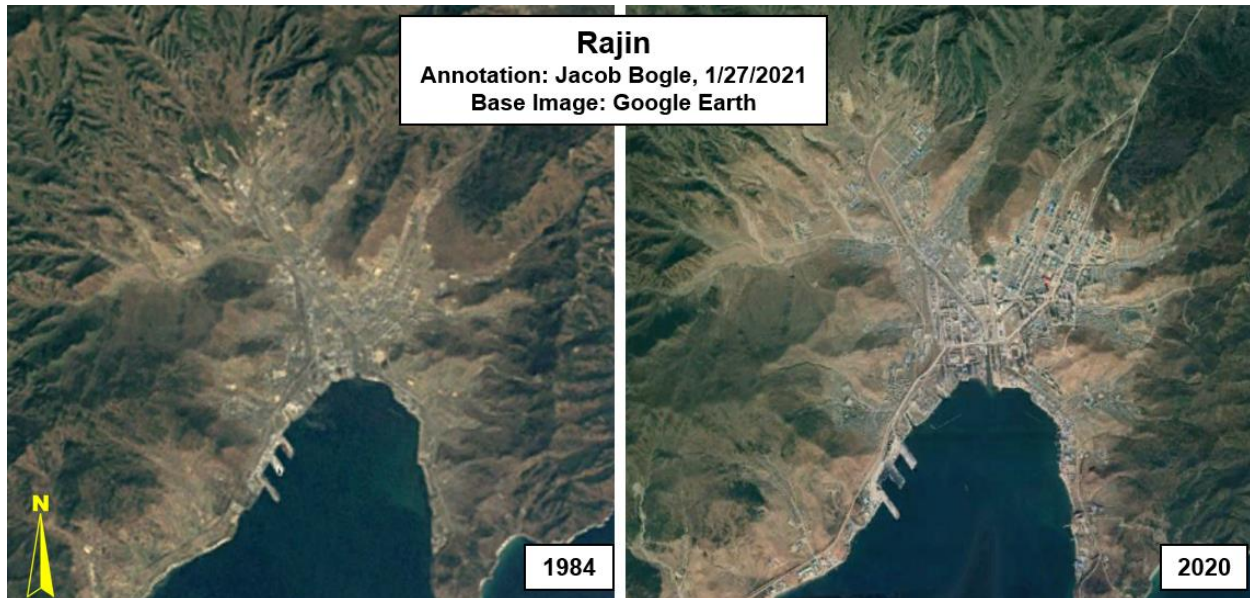


Rason

Prior to the creation of the Rason Special Economic Zone, the area was split into two cities: Rajin and Songbon. The word “Rason” is a portmanteau of the two words. Rajin (also spelled Najin) is the southern of the two cities and has a long and complex history. The current population of the now combined area is approximately 230,000.



Comparison of the city from 1984 and 2020. Landsat Imagery/Google Earth.

It has generally been administered separately from North Hamgyong Province and from 1972-1991, it was used as a Soviet warm-water port in the event Vladivostok (124 km northeast) was frozen during winter. This established a special security zone around the city and helped to make the area a good candidate for economic experimentation as average citizens were already prevented from entering.

The area was also the site of one of the last air battles of World War II, as Soviet forces attacked the Japanese air force on Aug. 10, 1945. A WWII era map of the city can be found [here](#). Some of the main roads remain the same today, but a lot has also changed.

Rajin had served as the terminus of the Hambuk and P'yŏngra rail lines since they were opened in 1935. The lines were eventually extended and Rajin is now connected to Songbon which then connects the region to Onsong and to the DPRK-Russian freight rail depot at Tumangang, the only land-based transportation link between the two countries.

Returning to history, we know that the area was inhabited during the Neolithic Period (10,000-4,500 BCE) if not earlier. Prior to the Joseon Dynasty, Rajin was little more than an agricultural village. As Joseon came into conflict with Imperial China (which also controlled parts of modern-day Russia at the time), the dynasty built border forts and the area's importance grew. The remains of one of the forts still exists at 42.485001° 130.558617°. There is also the Sungjon Pavilion at 42.381640° 130.645500°. Originally built in 1762, it commemorates a battle victory. The site fell into ruins but was rebuilt (along with a museum) in 2011.

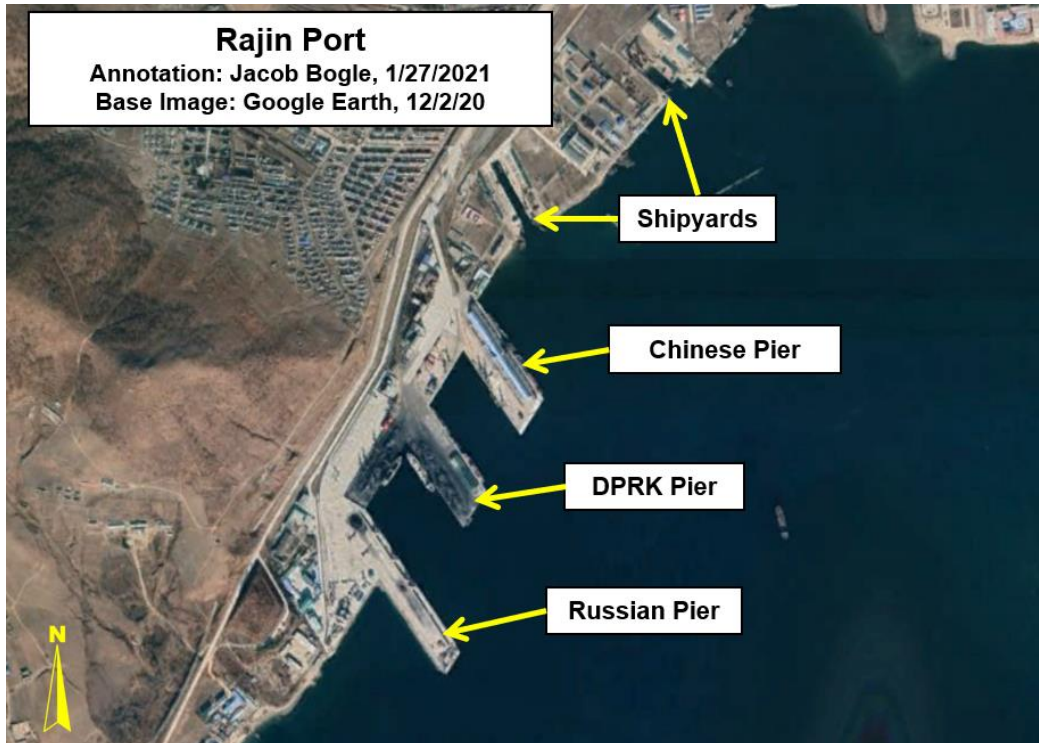
Both Rajin and Songbon also have sets of historic [animal pens](#) of an unknown age. There are at least 10 pens and 64 km of stone walls that were used to control the movements of animals and guide them into the circular pens for capture.



The **economics** of today's Rajin is tightly intertwined with the creation of the Rason Special Economic Zone.

Rajin and Songbon played a role in trade with the Soviet Union and was the only place where goods could come into the country from the USSR, but after the fall of the Soviet Union, the future of the area was very uncertain until North Korea decided to create the Zone in 1991/92. Initially, little foreign investment came into the Zone despite a lot of "hype" and outreach efforts. Nonetheless, the government created a 57.3 km long perimeter and began work to build new ports and other facilities.

There were occasional influxes of foreign investment, and several hotels, a casino, and a number of new companies were established. But, based on satellite imagery, it doesn't seem like widespread changes and investments began until the early 2000s, with a boost happening under Kim Jong Un.

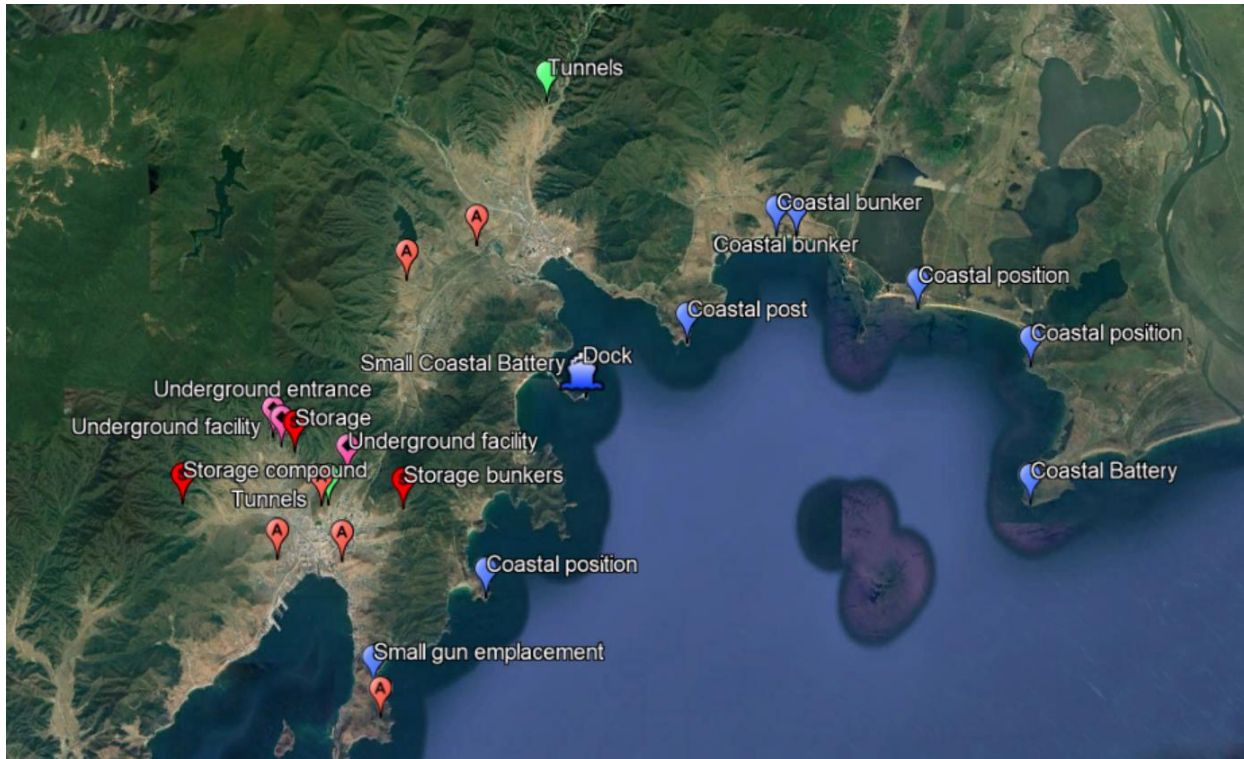


Rajin has almost been totally rebuilt, its main port remains active, and scores of housing developments and new businesses have been established. The border checkpoints were also expanded, and infrastructure has been greatly improved. Prior to the tightened sanctions in 2016 and 2017, Rajin was a transshipment point for upwards of 140,000 tonnes annually of Russian coal on its way to South Korea. The pier leasing agreement alone yielded North Korea €600,000/yr.

One of the key obstacles to foreign investment has been North Korea's notoriously bad history of defaulting on loans, refusing to repatriate profits, and having a complex legal system that offered little protection to investors. This began to change after 2014 and a new comprehensive legal framework has been developed that should allow greater economic growth (outside of the matters associated with sanctions and [COVID-19](#)).

There are three main markets in Rajin with a combined area of 2,410 sq. meters and they have seen moderate growth since 2011. A small water park was constructed in 2014/2015 (42.239191° 130.304777°), the stadium was rebuilt in 2017, and work on a new open-air theater (42.243096° 130.314708°) began in 2018 but progress has been slow, and it is still not finished as of late 2022.

A civilian UAV facility (42.275404° 130.277073°) was also constructed in 2022 as part of a nation-wide [project](#).



Currently active military sites as of 2020.

The Zone's **military importance** is growing. The multiple ports in Rajin and Songbon can still offer Russia a warm-water winter port if a new agreement is ever needed, and it has the ability to serve as a major trading hub (which has defense implications all its own). There are two small naval docks, the No. 28 Shipbuilding factory (which has constructed midget submarines, patrol boats, and other small vessels for the KPA Navy), and a number of underground facilities.

The other docks and ports can also be refitted to serve a military purpose, and the area could theoretically allow KPA Navy vessels easier access to the Tsugaru and La Perouse straits, enabling the navy to leave to Sea of Japan and enter the Pacific Ocean without having to pass through the heavily monitored Korea Strait between South Korea and Japan; creating a more direct threat to the east coast of Japan and to US military holdings in the region.

Songbon is also home to the Sungni Chemical Plant which has a capacity to refine 2 million tonnes of petroleum products a year. Keeping the plant operational is of key importance to national defense as the only other refinery in the country is Ponghwa Chemical Factory, near Sinuiju. Without these facilities, North Korea becomes irreparably crippled.

***Originally created for An AccessDPRK Patreon supporter. Free online access has been granted by the patron. This city brief has been edited for tone, context, and added references when needed.**

Jacob Bogle, 1/27/2021 (updated Jan. 15, 2022)

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