

Songbon is the northern town within the Rason Special Economic Zone, along the border with China and Russia. The current population of the combined SEZ area is approx. 230,000.

Songbon and the surrounding area (including Undok in N. Hamgyong Province) used to be called Unggi and was a major coal producing region during the Japanese occupation period. It is also alleged to be one of the sources of North Korea's uranium, as low-grade coal contains small levels of the element. The June 13 Coal Field in Undok still has some activity to this day.

Historically, Songbon was more important than Rajin until the Japanese occupation, although both have been intertwined over the years. However, Rajin received the bulk of economic investment from the establishment of the SEZ in the early 1990s. But, Songbon has slowly been growing with the light & heavy industry, energy, and mining sectors gaining in value over time, while the importance of the fishing industry has declined from roughly 60% of the overall economy to contributing less than 10%.



One of the largest developments has been the construction of a new housing district to north of the city. Built from 2015-2017, it contains around 200 housing units, a school, and a medical clinic. Across from the site is an agricultural facility that was likewise modernized.

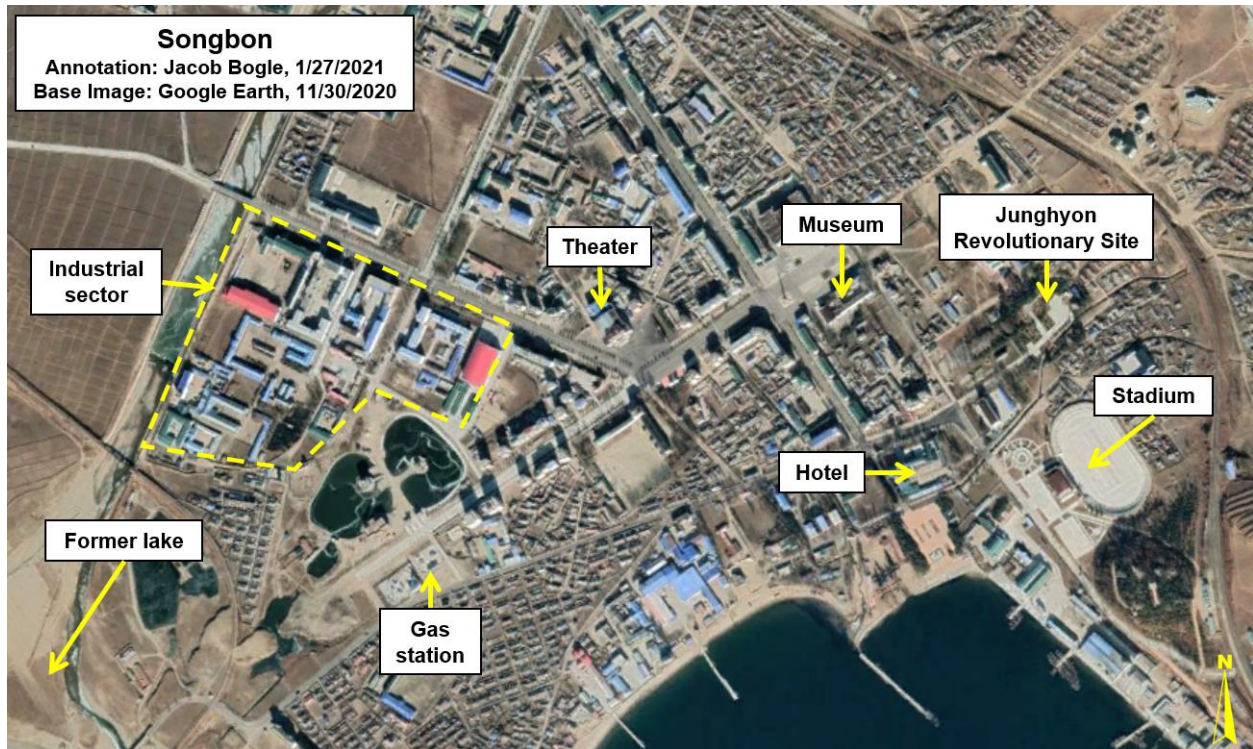
Part of this growth has been the limited but sustained cross-border trade with Russia. The DPRK-Russia freight line runs through the city and the border crossing is at 42.414238° 130.639085°. Each country uses different gauge rail lines, so the Tumangang Regauging Facility is located on the DPRK side to make the switch from Standard (1435 mm) to Standard-Russian (1520 mm). The rail facilities at Tumangang were modernized in 2021-2022 (with new customs facilities having been built in 2017).



Some additional changes include the conversion of the June 16 Thermal Power Plant from oil-fired to coal-fired (from 2016-2019), a new mine that began operations in 2011, and the opening of the Tumangang Brewery (Dec. 2020) at 42.295779° 130.344171°.

The second North Korean refinery is in Songbun. Construction of the Sungri Chemical Plant began in 1968 with Soviet assistance. It was completed in 1973 and eventually had a refining capacity of 2 million tons a year. This included not only the production of light and heavy fuels, but multiple chemicals important to other industries (benzyl, naphtha, etc.). With the economic collapse of the 1990s, imports of Russian oil stopped. The refinery was able to maintain lower levels of operations with oil from Iran, Yemen and Oman, and later resumed imports from Russia. But the complex has been surpassed in importance by Pongwha and has gone through periods of inactivity. The exact level of current operations is unknown.

6 km east of downtown Songbun is the Ungsang Port. Built decades ago to facilitate the timber trade, its newer SEZ-related facilities were not completed until 2019-2020. Also under Kim Jong Un, the Rason tree nursery was established at 42.334254° 130.349054°. This is one of a series of large tree nurseries being constructed in each provincial-level administrative district to provide the needed saplings for reforestation efforts.



Songbon's main road layout has remained the same since the Korean War, but the buildings and their positions have changed dramatically.

The small Ryongsu Lake was filled in from 2008-2010 to add ~70 hectares of agricultural land, the Songbon Stadium has been totally rebuilt, the industrial district has been expanded, and the port facilities have been improved.

A series of casinos and hotels were also built south of the city at 42.303063° 130.391749°. These remain popular with Russian and Chinese visitors.

Militarily, the Rason SEZ is not protected by surface-to-air missiles (perhaps due to its closeness to multiple international borders) but it does have nine anti-aircraft artillery batteries deployed in a line 25 km long. The map used in the Rajin report can be consulted for this area. Rason and N. Hamgyong Province are defended by the Korean Peoples' Army VI Corps and the 2nd Air Combat Command based in Toksan.

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

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