

Economic Exchange Utilizing the “Sea Road” in Sakai Port and Local Government Cooperation

KIKKAWA Toshiaki

Director-General, Port Management Committee Secretariat, Sakai Port Authority

Sakai Port is a major port straddling Tottori and Shimane Prefectures on the Sea of Japan. Within the jurisdiction of Kobe Customs, Sakai Port is the second oldest after Kobe Port, opening in 1896, and at the time was linked by regular shipping services to the likes of Dalian and Busan. The region’s commerce with the countries on the facing shore has flourished since ancient times, and there are a large number of ruins and historical sites testifying to the reality of that exchange, such as the Mukibanda remains of a Yayoi-period settlement. It was a gateway for the exchange supporting the dawning of Japan.

In 1989 the first regular container route connecting Sakai Port and Southeast Asia went into operation, and in 1995 routes connecting it to China and the ROK also came into service. Even though on the Sea of Japan coast, the hinterland of Sakai Port has a good population of 600,000, and is blessed with a great number of tourist sites, where history, culture, nature, foods, sports, and hot springs can be enjoyed. In June 2009, unique in Japan, a Japan–ROK–Russia regular ferry service came into operation—connecting Sakaiminato, Donghae and Vladivostok—and has continued in stable operation. Once each week, the service connects to Vladivostok in two days, and has the advantages of fixed timings, lead time, and bulk cargo transportation. Primarily it exports automotive components and construction materials and imports marine produce. In Tottori Prefecture, they have promoted such matters as conclusion of a friendship exchange agreement with Primorsky Krai in Russia, testing of land–sea multimodal transportation via the Sino–Russian border in coordination with the GTI (the UN Greater Tumen development programme), and the establishment of public–private coordination platforms coupled to the Japan–Russia intergovernmental economic cooperation plans, and they are working on the promotion of economic exchange and the activation of shipping routes. In April 2017, the number of passengers disembarking at Sakai Port since the commencement of services broke the 200,000 barrier. It can be said that the establishment of a regular cross-Japan Sea ferry route has been realized, with the venture capitalist spirit of ROK shipping firms and the mutual trust and coordinated support between Japan and ROK local authorities coming together. The number of port calls by passenger cruise ships at Sakai Port in 2017 approximately doubled from the previous year, to 61, and the number of passengers was 67,000, both of which are the highest ever recorded. A variety of passenger cruise ships call at the port, from small luxury vessels centered on Westerners to giant “casual” vessels with a capacity exceeding 4,000 people. The causes which can be given for Sakai Port increasing its port calls are: its becoming a member of the Asia Cruise Terminal Association (ACTA); its geographical proximity to the ROK and China; its possessing berths for the docking of large vessels; and its undertaking of the attraction of cruise tours in cooperation with ports on the Sea of Japan coast. The “Sea Road”, including regular services and cruise ships, is creating new flows of people and goods, and has the potential to completely change the regional transportation and logistics environment. The areas facing the Sea of Japan have common challenges in transportation and logistics. For the resolution of these issues, I consider it crucial to continue accompanying support for public–private economic activities, while deepening the coordination and cooperation between local governments regardless of whether domestic or overseas. If the Sea of Japan becomes a sea of exchange and commerce, it will be possible to draw out the potential of the Northeast Asian region.

[Translated by ERINA]