



A New Paradigm for Trust-Building on the Korean Peninsula: Turning Korea's DMZ into a UNESCO World Heritage Site

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Can an effort to make peace between humans and nature help bring peace among humans? For nearly two decades, the Six-Party states—the two Koreas, the United States, China, Russia, and Japan—either bilaterally or multilaterally have attempted to denuclearize North Korea and make peace on the Korean peninsula.¹ Many options considered by the US and its allies, including a preemptive military strike and coercive economic sanctions against North Korea, have proven ineffectual or ethically unsupportable. Political and diplomatic negotiations have lacked both mutual regard among the parties and faith in the process and have thus far proven to be useless.² Today it seems apparent that the United States and its allies cannot accomplish what they want under the current negotiating scheme. A new paradigm is needed for building trust and for moving forward. Collaborative efforts to turn Korea's Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) into a UNESCO World Heritage Site can provide a trust-building measure among the Six-Party nations. Environmental and cultural cooperation among the major adversaries, prompted by internationally neutral scientists and scholars, will provide a unique opportunity in the DMZ. The efforts to change human behavior toward the DMZ's natural and cultural importance can help make peace among humans and serve as a new paradigm for creating peace on the Korean peninsula.

During the last two decades, various military, economic, political and diplomatic measures have been explored for resolving the North Korean nuclear issue. At one time, a US preemptive surgical strike against the North Korean nuclear arsenal was considered, but was rejected out of concern for the potentially devastating consequences North Korean retaliation might bring. Recently, the relationship among the Six-Party nations worsened because of the sinking of the South Korean warship *Cheonan* in the Yellow Sea and the subsequent debate over the cause of the incident. The US and its allies are currently seeking heightened international economic sanctions against North Korea in order to force the regime to abandon its nuclear weapons program. The effectiveness of such actions is doubtful, however, because of the unique character of North Korea's economy, its economic isolation, and because of China's continued economic support of North Korea to maintain its own strategic interests in the region.

Nevertheless, there have been several major breakthroughs resulting in significant, detailed, and very promising statements and agreements. The parties involved in the negotiations, however, failed to implement the agreements and statements on a long-term basis, and instead blamed each other for the lack of progress. The US and its allies insist on a complete, verifiable, and irreversible nuclear disarmament of North Korea before getting into the process of diplomatic normalization, economic aid and security assurances through a peace treaty. For its part, North Korea demands a peace treaty and economic aid before entering into a gradual abandonment of its nuclear weapons program.³ These events, paired with renewed distrust among the Six-Party nations in the wake of the sinking of the *Cheonan*, bode ill for finding common ground for denuclearizing and building peace on the Korean peninsula.

Given the history of deep-rooted distrust, it seems obvious that trust-building measures among the Six-Party states are essential if progress toward North Korean denuclearization and the establishment of US-North Korea diplomatic relations is to be secured.⁴ One such possible step toward accommodation lies in the potentially neutral areas of environment and culture. There is a window of opportunity in Korea's DMZ, which has served as a buffer zone between North and South Korea since the end of the Korean War in 1953.⁵ The DMZ has become an "accidental sanctuary" for rare plants and flowers and endangered animals.⁶ Amazingly, the DMZ clearly demonstrates how nature can restore itself after the destructive effects of war.⁷ The area's biodiversity has thrived, creating a place that is both ecologically and culturally significant for the two Koreas and for Northeast Asia.⁸



The DMZ is traversed by many rivers and riparian systems, and includes rich matrices of forests, wetlands, prairies, bogs and estuaries. The zone contains over 1,100 plants species, over 80 fish species, around 50 mammal species, including the Asiatic Black Bear, leopard, lynx, Goral sheep and possibly tiger. Hundreds of endangered bird species such as Black-faced Spoonbills and Red-crowned and White-naped Cranes migrate through the DMZ going to and from Mongolia, China, Russia, Vietnam, Japan, the Philippines and Australia.⁹



Geological features in the DMZ such as a columnar joint located in the Hantan River and near the Imjin River and Cheorwon's lime rock cave have geologically high value for conservation. Within the DMZ, there are numerous historical and archeological treasures that have yet to be explored and

preserved for posterity, including Gungye, an ancient capital city near Cheorwon. Important sites from the Choson period also exist in the DMZ, awaiting study and preservation. Many battlegrounds

and other sites from the Korean War are located inside the DMZ. These, too, need to be examined and preserved for future cultural and historical study.¹⁰

The cultural and ecological value of the DMZ has captured the attention of people around the globe, including renowned biologist Edward O. Wilson of Harvard University and Ted Turner, founder of the United Nations Foundation and CNN. In the 2003 DMZ Forum conference at the Asia Society, Wilson suggested that the DMZ is a "Korean Gettysburg and Yosemite rolled together" and that revenues from tourism to the DMZ could be significant.¹¹ Turner has noted that the DMZ has global importance as a symbol of war that could potentially bring peace.¹²

One way that goal could be advanced is through UNESCO World Heritage Site designation. The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural



Cheorwon plains

Organization (UNESCO) was established on November 16, 1945, to promote international cooperation and "to contribute to the building of peace, the eradication of poverty, sustainable development and intercultural dialogue through education, science, culture, communication and information" (www.unesco.org). One of the most visible ways UNESCO achieves its goals is through the establishment of World Heritage Sites, which protect and promote areas of cultural, natural, or mixed (cultural and natural) significance.¹³ Currently, there are 890 such sites and each represents cultural and ecological treasures important to current and future generations.

Only countries that have signed the UNESCO World Heritage Convention pledging to protect their natural and cultural heritage can submit nomination proposals for parts of their territory to be considered for inclusion in UNESCO's World Heritage List. Both Korea are members of the World Heritage Convention and since the DMZ is the border between the two countries, a potential WHS must be initiated by the two Korea together. North Korea already has proposed various sites, including Mt. Kumgang, for WHS designation and South Korea has also put a number of sites, including Mt. Seorak, on its tentative list of WHS. Notably, both Mt. Kumgang and Mt. Seorak are linked through the DMZ, so the whole area will be of outstanding universal value to be shared by the world's citizens.

By obtaining WHS status for the DMZ, the two Korea could get training and research assistance, technical cooperation, and promotional and educational assistance from the World Heritage Centre in conjunction with the WHS Advisory Bodies. Under these auspices, the two Korea could create a "DMZ International Park." Such a park would create a contiguous ecological zone across the entire DMZ and re-establish links between Mt. Kumgang and Mt. Seorak—both of which are already national parks in their respective nations. The DMZ International Park would pave the way for a profitable and sustainable eco-tourism site attractive to large numbers of visitors from around the world, including from the US, China, Russia, Japan, North and South Korea, and Europe. The DMZ International Park would provide a safe haven for nature and humans as all parties would have a stake in assuring the continued economic or political advantages afforded by the park and would, therefore, make efforts to avoid staging hostile military actions in or near the DMZ. The creation of such a park could also lead to a multi-lateral agreement to set up a memorial for all the soldiers and civilians who died during the Korean War and to bilateral talks between the two Korea on the reduction of conventional weapons deployed around the DMZ. There would be no better way for rebuilding trust among the major players than by agreeing to register the DMZ as a tentative UNESCO World Heritage Site (WHS) and by working together, and in conjunction with internationally neutral scientists and scholars from organizations such as the World Conservation Union (IUCN), the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), and the International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property (ICCROM), in researching and conserving the DMZ.



Mount Seorak

Indeed, cooperation is the only viable option left. Antagonism has certainly not been productive, and options such as a pre-emptive military strike against North Korea or continuing the coercive and haphazard economic sanctions are untenable. Either of these could result in humanitarian and ecological disaster and could lead to wider unrest in the region. Each of the Six-Party nations has a vested interest in transforming current approaches toward both the North Korean regime and its nuclear program. In particular, the US and its allies should acknowledge the deadlock and should establish a new long-term policy toward North Korea based on the assumption that the North Korean state will be sustained for a long period of time.

A paradigm change is needed to break through the current logjam. A critical first step could involve trust-building measures through an environmental and cultural approach in the DMZ. The new neutral international player, UNESCO World Heritage Centre, can help build trust among the major adversaries on the Korean peninsula. An agreement by the two Korea to register the DMZ for prospective listing as a UNESCO World Heritage Site status would provide the Six-Party states a new paradigm for searching for peace on the Korean peninsula and for the denuclearization of North Korea. The US and China should encourage both Korea to enter into such an agreement, which can be made without incurring political and diplomatic prerequisites and any added military and security

concerns. The environmental and cultural preservation of the DMZ could provide an unprecedented opportunity to resolve the military and political deadlock on the Korean peninsula.

Notes

- ¹ [Stephen W. Bosworth](#), "US Policy Toward North Korea", a Keynote Speech at the DMZ Forum Conference, New York University, July 27, 2001
- ² Lisa M. Brady, "Life in the DMZ: Turning a Diplomatic Failure into an Environmental Success," *Diplomatic History* 32/4 (September 2008), 585.
- ³ [Suk Hi Kim](#), "Will North Korea Be Able to Overcome the Third Wave of Its Collapse?"
- ⁴ [Peter Hayes](#), "Sustainable Security in the Korean Peninsula: Envisioning a Northeast Asian Biodiversity Corridor;" [Harry G. Barnes, Jr.](#), "Working with North Korea," a Speech at the DMZ Forum Conference, New York University, July 27, 2001
- ⁵ Don Oberdorfer, *The Two Korea: A Contemporary History* (1997; rev. and updated ed., New York, 2001), 1.
- ⁶ Peter Matthiessen, "Accidental Sanctuary," *Audubon* 98 (July-August 1996)
- ⁷ Ke Chung Kim, "Preserving Biodiversity in Korea's Demilitarized Zone," *Science* 278 (10 October 1997); David R. Zimmerman, "A Fragile Victory for Beauty on an Old Asian Battleground," *Smithsonian* 12 (October 1981): 57.
- ⁸ Ke Chung Kim and Edward O. Wilson, "The Land that War Protected," *New York Times*, Opinion, 10 December 2002.

⁹ [Julia Adeney Thomas](#), "The Exquisite Corpses of Nature and History: The Case of the Korean DMZ," *The Asia-Pacific Journal*, Vol. 43-3-09, October 26, 2009.

¹⁰ Information can be found at the [DMZ Forum website](#).

¹¹ [Edward O. Wilson's speech](#) at the DMZ Forum Conference, Asia Society, New York, July 23, 2003.

¹² [Ted Turner's speech](#) at the DMZ Forum Conference, Seoul, Korea, August 16-17, 2005.

¹³ [Alessandro Balsamo](#), "The Korean DMZ: A Perfect Example of World Heritage Nomination, Mixing Natural and Cultural Values" and a Keynote Speech by Francesco Bandarin, Director of UNESCO World Heritage Centre, at the DMZ Forum Conference, Seoul, Korea, July 15-16, 2004.

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