

## A DAY-TRIP TO THE DMZ

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On my first trip to Korea in 1997, the list of available sightseeing trips included one to the DMZ (or De-Militarized Zone, the border between North and South Korea) but this meant absolutely nothing to me. All I had learned about Korea was that there was a war, the peninsula was divided and that India had supplied peacekeepers. Why anyone would want to visit an inter-state border, I could not fathom. My colleague was eager and went, perhaps because a relative had fought in that war. Over the years, I have occasionally wondered whether I, as an international relations scholar, should have gone.

When we learned that Seoul was to host the 2025 International Political Science Association World Congress, that question acquired a new salience. Should I go to the DMZ this time?

By now, my lack of interest was reinforced by my views on militarisation and militarism in general. What does it mean to be visiting sites of war, even if a ceasefire prevails at the moment? The looming military presence and the naked nationalism that are an essential feature of these places are unpleasant. The celebration of military victories, the gloating and the self-congratulation are distasteful. Did I want to be contributing to and endorsing these with my presence?

Some curiosity and a feeling that I might at some point regret missing a second opportunity to check off this box made me devote a day to this trip. I was happy when a friend with a very similar political view joined me for the excursion.



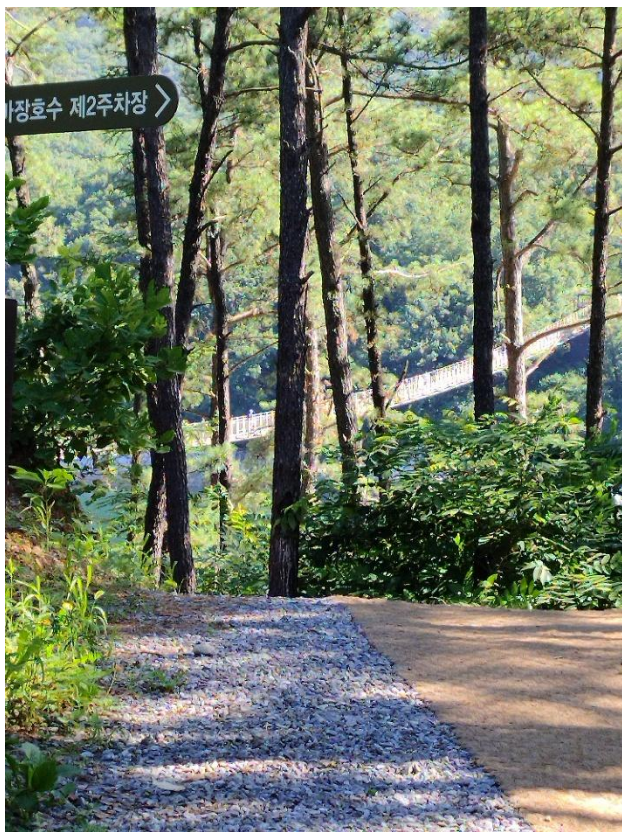


We had just landed the evening before and were still recovering from a journey but we set out early in the morning, with a large group—just one of many, many, many groups to flock the region that day alone—into what turned out to be a beautiful but hot day.

### **Majang Lake**

The first stop of the day was the very beautiful Majang Lake. Off the bus, down we went, then up again and down again... to glimpse this absolutely lovely, peaceful body of water, ringed by hills and trees and marked by its distinctive red suspension bridge. Walking very slowly, I missed all of the guide's commentary which surely would have described the military importance of this bridge—the site of ferocious fighting between the Korean and Chinese armies. You have to wonder how human beings can have the heart to rent a divine silence with the noise of war.

I would have been content to spend the day at the Lake, either dawdling in the open-air café at the top of the hill or in the very nice air-conditioned one by the road. I had paid for and started this tour but the truth is, I was still not very interested in it. The true draw was the bus ride, just having a chance to see a little bit beyond the city.







## Imjingak

Along the Demilitarized Zone lies Imjingak, advertised as a Peace Park. The park commemorates the division of the peninsula and countless Korean families; marks the battles between the two halves that are now warring neighbours and celebrates those who fled the North. There is a peculiar cocktail of peace messaging and militarism in the park, possible only in a time and place convinced that war is the only path to peace.

There is a natural poignancy to war ruins like the bombed train wreckage, with bullet holes. The accompanying commentary by guides, shouted out simultaneously in multiple languages, dramatizing events and underscoring the good-versus-evil morality play, actually detracts from what one would feel by just seeing the wreck and imagining the human experience.



Having missed the commentary on this because I walk slowly, I was able to look at the twin statues of seated girls more attentively. These are replicas of the "[Statue of Peace](#)" in Seoul and elsewhere—a young girl, seated on a chair, with a vacant chair next to her. This is a tribute to the many, many girls and women who were abducted and enslaved for sexual exploitation by the Japanese Army. There are two in Imjingak, representing the two Koreas. But in the gap between the two statues, we are also reminded of the separation of families. The quiet of the statues underscores how political borders, all over the world, leave families and communities bereft.

Just past the statues are people's wishes for peace, tied to a barbed wire fence. As I took a photo, I heard the guide point to a bridge behind us that she called the 'Freedom Bridge,'

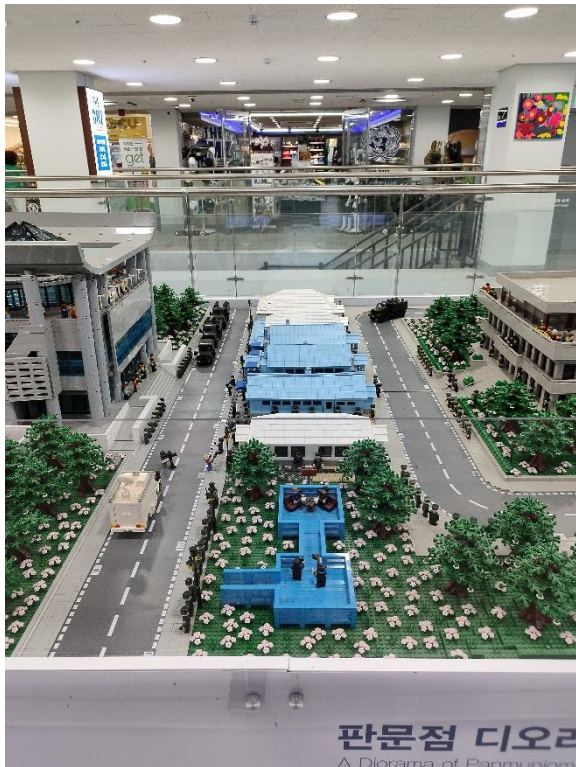


site of a POW exchange. The bridge was being cleaned; the temptation to take a photo and caption it 'Freedom needs maintenance' was irresistible!

I wandered away from the tour group a little at this point and as I tend to do when I am tired, started taking photos of trees! My friend and I then took a coffee and shopping break before wandering back towards the bus.







One cannot actually visit the Joint Security Area in Panmunjom but there is a model that one can photograph in the recreation area of Imjingak.

On the way back, we passed this curious little set of bronze handprints. Primed by the nationalistic narratives we had been hearing, we concluded it must be South Korean soldiers or North Korean defectors but it appears to be a common practice featuring celebrities in general—according to Google lens. An odd location for this!

I miss a lot because of my limited energy and wandering interest and the fact that the commentary I am already preparing in my head is always more absorbing than anything outside—especially in a crowd. As a result, I don't have a lot more to say about Imjingak. There is another side to the park that features memorials to different contingents of soldiers from around the world who fought and died in Korea. I did not go there.

### **Driving around the DMZ**

As we drove to the next big stop, we stopped at a military check-post where a young soldier came aboard to check our names and passports. We passed a border crossing where we made a U-turn (I think—still tired from my travel and warm from the sun, I kept dozing off and the commentary did not help!). We passed the Unification Bridge (or “Cow Bridge”) and heard the legend of the industrialist who led a convoy of cows from South to North to repay a debt from his past.



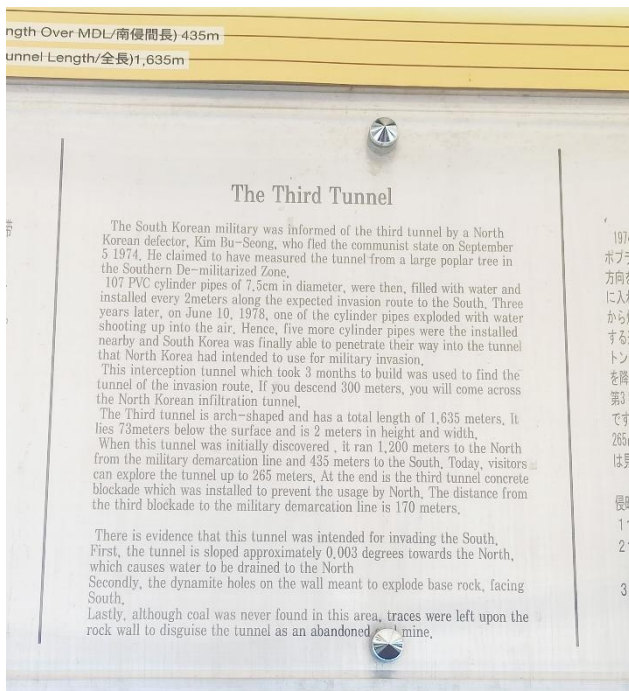
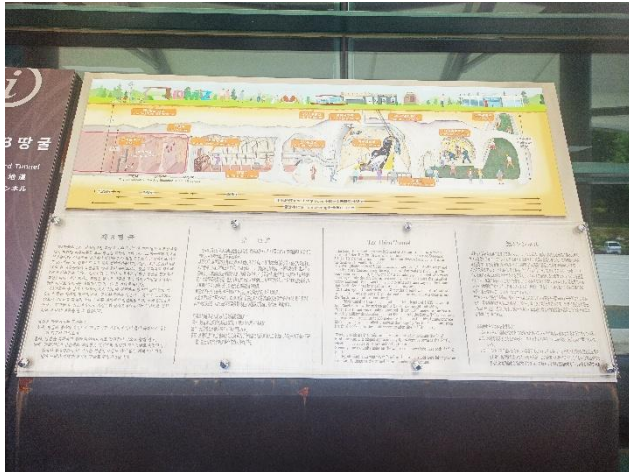
## The 3<sup>rd</sup> Infiltration Tunnel

The “crown jewel” of the DMZ tour is the 3<sup>rd</sup> Infiltration Tunnel. From the name to the hype to the awed tones of the guide on site to the long, dark trek down the tunnel—this is the moment the war junkies on the tour have been waiting for.

The story of the tunnel is available outside and the spin is everywhere: The North Koreans built tunnels to bring their army into South Korea. South Koreans were trying to find these tunnels and just when they were going to give up, they found this one which was deep and broad and large enough for a rail-road track. They walled the tunnel and true to the spirit of capitalism, turned it into a tourist site.

I did not go down the tunnel. Not only was it too much military stuff for me, I was also daunted by the prospect of walking down 70 metres of steps and then walking back. Instead, my friend and I spent a lovely hour in the shade of the trees in the garden behind the entrance to the tunnels. Very peaceful and lovely!

In an Instagram-ready country, how could the 3<sup>rd</sup> Infiltration Tunnel be left behind? There was a little spot in the garden with the map of the Korean peninsula and a line marking the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel. I cannot locate the words now but I recall a question to the effect: Which side are you on or where would you stand or where would you rather live? The correct answer, next to a sign that says “DMZ” is “South Korea.” How could the peace educator in me not stand astride the line, reaching out to both sides... extending an invitation to peace?







### **You can purchase a souvenir of war here!**

We walked back into the building in search of air-conditioning and visited the souvenir shop. What souvenirs might one expect in a military tourism site? Not what I bought—a pretty bookmark in the shape of a fan! Fatigues, camouflage packs and toy guns at the Imjingak store had us rolling our eyes, but at the 3<sup>rd</sup> Tunnel, we saw hand grenade pouches too! How militarised must society get that it would be normal for a person to carry a hand grenade pouch?

The marriage of militarism and capitalism is everywhere evident in South Korea; how then could it be missing from the DMZ?



### **The kindness of strangers**

The last stop on our tour was the Dora Observatory. It involved a steep climb to a viewpoint from which, on a clear day, you could see North Korea. North Korea, for its part, puts up a model village for show. Photos are no longer allowed but in the age of the Internet, this is no barrier. The guide had photos from when they were and was offering to mail them to anyone interested.

The climb was too steep for me. I was preparing to go wait on the bus although it was really hot, when someone popped out of an office and signalled that I should come in and sit in the air-conditioning. So there I sat, using my Korean data connection to send home photographs, cooling down. He offered me “ice water” and after our sign language exchange of kindness and gratitude, I settled down to reflect on the kindness of strangers.

Ultimately, no country is foreign when you encounter human kindness in its simplest form—a glass of water and cool shade on a hot day. Offered with grace and warmth and with no follow-up interrogation (not just because of a language barrier).

On our way back to Seoul, we stopped at a “Farmers’ Market” run over by tourists where different kinds of bean paste and ginseng products were being sold.





## **Military Tourism**

The glorification of war goes hand in hand with nationalism. In international relations, we study about warring dyads and enduring rivalries. For states in these relationships, nationalism is expressed through a continuous expression of their uniqueness and their superiority to the other. Everything is a competition. Security vis-à-vis the spawns a militaristic culture that is one strand of nationalistic expression.

Every nation-state memorialises war and wartime valour as one aspect of its national glory. These sites are part of many tourist itineraries. Sometimes, as we pose for photos, we forget that these are war memorials or militaristic markers. Examples abound: the Afghan Church in Mumbai, the Arc de Triomphe in Paris, Nelson's Column or the Cenotaph in London or for that matter, Arlington Cemetery. The tourist spectacle at the Wagah crossing between India and Pakistan is also such an example. Tour groups pause and take pictures and over time, for most people, there is not time to pause and think about the war or warrior, what they fought for and what followed (or did not). We forget that people on all sides died and were injured, lost their homes and their loved ones. These memorials tell one story about the war, and over time, people forget the others. That is what the war memorials of northern Sri Lanka are supposed to accomplish.

Of all of these, perhaps the DMZ tour is the slickest, best-packaged capitalist project. South Korean capitalism markets the tour and the South Korean story to visitors from around the world. It employs countless tour companies (drivers, guides, office staff). Every now and then, you are invited—verbally or visually—to say, “Wow, South Korea is so wonderful! I would rather live here (than the North).” (And South Korea is wonderful but for many reasons that have nothing to do with the North.) It creates little market-places remarkably close to what is still an unresolved border, with both sides dreaming of unification, albeit with different visions. You can buy souvenirs of war, reminders of militarism, handicrafts and tasty snacks and beverages, almost at the frontier!

What draws people to military tourist areas? Or war memorials. I wonder about this all the time. The first time I visited one out of choice was my visit in 1985 to the Hiroshima Peace Park. I was 21 and that was a pilgrimage for me to pay homage to victims of the 1945 atomic bombing and to promise myself that I would always work for peace. I have tried to keep that promise. But I remember this clearly. As we took photos, my friend and I kept serious faces everywhere. Not for us the ubiquitous, cheery Insta-style smiles and signs (had they then existed!) in such a serious place. This was a sombre expedition.

I am still discomfited by people posing happily in front of these sites. If you Google the Statues of Peace, you will see images of people occupying the vacant chair with a smile or a “Victory” sign. Do they understand what ‘Comfort Women’ underwent? And to be fair, when you are on and off a tour bus and a guide is talking to you non-stop, there is no time to think, is there? You take the photo now and hope to have the thought later.

Although the tour was about the border and the conflict, the DMZ also represents the desire for reunification, expressed tangentially in the commentary, and it illustrated to me how intertwined war and peace are in people's imaginations. You cannot have peace without war, seems to be the message. We can theorise "positive peace" and "human security" but this has not reached popular or state visualizations in any real way.

So why do people go to such places? In the case of the DMZ tour, I am guessing some go because it is a place where their grandparents fought, or perhaps fled. It could be curiosity and the fact that it is now so heavily marketed that when you search for tours in and from Seoul, the DMZ tour is what comes up most. A small number probably come as I did—to check it off in case it turns out I should have gone!

For me, because I have always wondered about such places, it was also important to go so I could write about the tour. Through the day, I stored words and questions in my head (some so deep I cannot retrieve them) and brought back to Seoul questions and words that I have been waiting to write down. This writing completes the tour for me.

What I will hold in my heart for a very long time will be the image of the very quiet and very still Majang Lake, undisturbed by tourists marching up and down the Suspension Bridge. Peace. In a place of war.

