



An Ecological Framework for Promoting Inter-Korean Cooperation and Nuclear Free Future: a DMZ Peace Park



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by Peter Hayes and Roger Cavazos

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I. Introduction

Hayes and Cavazos suggest that a DMZ Peace Park could be a valuable and attractive element of inter-Korean cooperation, and one that is gaining traction under President Park's "trustpolitik". The authors suggest that it is essential to embed the narrower concept of a DMZ-only peace park in a regional approach to creating a biodiversity corridor—partly because biodiversity conservation requires this networked approach; and partly because an approach that involves six or seven countries is more likely to succeed over time than a solely inter-Korean endeavor.

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II. Special Report by Peter Hayes and Roger Cavazos

An Ecological Framework for Promoting Inter-Korean Cooperation and Nuclear Free Future: a DMZ Peace Park

An important element of the DPRK-ROK announcement of their agreement to reopen Kaesong Industrial Park* on August 14, 2013 [\[1\]](#) under new rules was a third party report that the DPRK would consider implementing a DMZ Peace Park should resumption of Kaesong pan out. [\[2\]](#) Previous approaches, official and informal, had been rebuffed by the DPRK since the mid-1990s when the notion of a “peace park” was first explored via UN channels in the mid-1990s. [\[3\]](#) However, given a new political context and President Park’s recently articulated “trustpolitik”, it is time to re-examine the concept. [\[4\]](#)

After two decades of careful preparation, it appears that a DMZ Peace Park might be an element of inter-Korean cooperation. We suggest that it is essential to embed the narrower concept of a DMZ-only peace park in a regional approach to creating a biodiversity corridor—partly because biodiversity conservation requires this networked approach; and partly because a six or seven (including Mongolia) approach is more likely to succeed over time than a solely inter-Korean approach.

Background to Concept of a DMZ Peace Park

The concept of establishing a DMZ peace park was pioneered by the DMZ Forum. [\[5\]](#) Once established, this park would preserve the biological assets of the Demilitarized Zone and the areas that are well preserved in the adjacent areas with controlled civilian access and therefore have experienced relatively light ecological degradation since the Korean War. The concept’s most recent versions also include an expanded area at the eastern coastal end of the DMZ to encompass important, already established nature reserves on both sides of the DMZ. The DMZ Forum describes the DMZ peace park as a “Project to Create a Park for Peace, Ecology, History, and Culture, Linking Sorak, Keumkang, and Cheolwon Regions.” [\[6\]](#) In its view, such a park would a) establish a “new model for South-North reconciliation and cooperation...in preparation of reunification; b) support a “new paradigm in the tourist business...and contribute South-North exchange through the establishment of an international tourist region;” c) build “trust between the two countries by reaching a sustainable agreement on utilization;” and d), position “Korea” to play “a leading role in the establishment and maintenance of an ecological network in the Northeast Asia region, which would include South Korea, North Korea, China, and Russia.” [\[7\]](#)

The DMZ Peace Park has been extended conceptually to cover the coastal-maritime area west of the DMZ—precisely the area of the Northern Limit Line disputes, and the March 2010 sinking of the Cheonan and the artillery exchange involving Yeonpyeong Island. In 2007, the Korea Maritime Institute produced a detailed and professional overview of this concept, and outlines six strategies to

achieve its realization, viz: the creation of a special peace and cooperation zone in the contested western waters; harmonization of conservation and rational use of the areas resources; strengthening of shared knowledge and building of local capacity; use of international cooperation to overcome inter-Korean suspicion and distrust; locale specific approaches; and the building of an institutional framework for consulting communities and increasing public awareness of the values encapsulated by the zone. [8]

Origins of the DMZ Peace Park [9]

Peter Hocknell has traced the early history of the DMZ peace park concept. Scholarly work began in the mid-sixties, but it took until the early 1990s for the idea to receive public attention. It was raised in 1991 at the UN Environment Programme (UNEP). It was floated by the ROK government at the Earth Summit in 1992. Both Koreas appeared receptive at that time. [10]


The current ROK concept is based on applying a long history of trans-boundary nature parks and restoration projects in conflict zones around the world, a concept pioneered by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN)[11] and UNEP. As of the end of the 20th century, one expert listed 138 “trans-frontier protected areas complexes” involving 488 separate protected areas, 27 of which involved 3 countries, and with 68 proposed new complexes. [12]

Arthur Westing, an expert on war and environment, applied the concept to the Korean DMZ in 1997 at a UNEP conference on trans-boundary protected areas and parks.[13] In this approach, the DMZ peace park aims to preserve the biota of the DMZ both for its intrinsic value and cultural landscape from development, and to draw upon these biodiversity assets for restoration of habitat and survival of endangered species elsewhere in Korea.

The Forum has built an effective network of supporters for this concept in the ROK and North America, and has obtained international support from eminent persons such as Nelson Mandela. In 2005, for example, Mandela offered to play a personal role in facilitating such park with the leaders of the DPRK and the ROK, noting the positive impact of the South African-Mozambique peace park not only in protecting endangered species such as elephants, but also on reducing poverty and creating sustainable livelihoods.[14] After 2003, Mandela (with support from Ted Turner) helped to instigate briefings by the Peace Parks Foundation of ROK and DPRK officials on peace parks in the southern Africa region.[15]


ROK Adoption and DPRK Rebuff

After attempting to enlist the DPRK in the project in 2001 (see below), the ROK government slowly responded to this idea and adopted policies that favor such an approach. Indeed, the official Korea Environment Institute has enumerated the issues that must be addressed to realize the vision of a DMZ peace park.[16] Moreover, the ROK Ministry of Environment declared in 2003 that the peace park was one of three “ecological axes” (see below) that frame Korean sustainability.

[caption id="attachment_32039" align="alignnone" width="393"] Ministry of the Environment (ROK) and Korea Environment Institute, “Policies on Conservation of the DMZ District Ecosystem,” Environmental Policy Bulletin, at: 2007, link. - See more at: <http://japanfocus.org/-Peter-Hayes/3423#sthash.RYfNw5qY.dpuf>[/caption]

A precept of the peace park community is that peace parks generate habits of dialogue and build


trust. In principle, this process may help to resolve related trans-boundary disputes or reduce tension in conflict zones. Westing's work on the subject emphasized this dimension, [17] and it also figured in ROK government thinking on the issue. Theoretically speaking, as Raul Lejano explains, "the peace park works precisely when parties cease to think only as autonomous individuals but begin to constitute themselves in relation to the other and in union with the other. In this situation, the park acts not as a buffer but as a bridge to cooperative activity." [18] From a security perspective, such activity serves as a confidence building measure that leads to greater mutual understanding and even trust between the parties directly involved – a concept with practical application in "trustpolitik".

[caption id="attachment_32040" align="alignnone" width="560"] Source: G. Bennett and Kalemani Jo Mulongoy, Review Of Experience With Ecological Networks, Corridors And Buffer Zones, CBD Technical Series No. 23, Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity, March 2006, link. - See more at: <http://japanfocus.org/-Peter-Hayes/3423#sthash.RYfNw5qY.dpuf>[/caption]

However, it is also true that unless trans-boundary peace parks are promoted in a manner sensitive to the concerns of both parties engaged in conflict, they can backfire and even deepen distrust. In the case of the DMZ peace park, after showing initial interest, the DPRK government has proven distinctly unresponsive. Whether the reluctance to engage stems from DPRK domestic bureaucratic issues, the disinterest of the KPA to have yet another non-military intrusion onto its domain, or whether it stems from a more profound disagreement on a conceptual basis, the effect has been the same.


Indeed, in 2001, the ROK government attempted to achieve DPRK cooperation on establishing the DMZ as a UNESCO Trans-boundary Biosphere Reserve. A proposed Peace Park would include both sides of the DMZ. Both Koreas are members of UNESCO, so both parties would be required to submit their individual claims in order to form a complete park. [19] In April 2001, the ROK National Security Council reportedly facilitated the delivery of an official "notice" from the chairman of the ROK Man and the Biosphere Programme (which falls under UNESCO's rubric) to his counterpart in North Korea. According to the ROK Ministry of Environment, the notice emphasized the DMZ's "environmental value" and proposed to designate it a UNESCO Trans-boundary Biosphere Reserve. The DPRK side reportedly "objected" to the reserve on the grounds that it exploited the "pain of national division," leading to an end of official discussions. [20]

UNESCO had previously attempted to establish formal and informal relations with the DPRK through private channels and via UNESCO's Beijing office, but had asserted political conditionality (that is, recognition of UNESCO ROK to enable direct negotiations) in these contacts. Unsurprisingly, these overtures were rebuffed.

[caption id="attachment_32041" align="alignnone" width="699"] Source: W.B. Kim, "Design of Infrastructure Development in North Korea: A Practical Approach," presented at DPRK Energy Experts Working Group, Nautilus Institute, Beijing[/caption]

Overall, as conceived by this community, the linear version of a DMZ peace park is a patchwork quilt of protected areas that are off-limits except for research and education, national parks, protected

land and sea-scapes, multiple use areas, and cultural landscapes and cultural heritage sites.[21] As Joshua Ginsberg of the Wildlife Conservation Society noted in 1999, in biological terms, the DMZ peace park is more “corridor” than “protected area,” more “edge” than “center.”[22] Under the current conditions of military management of the northern and southern DMZ and adjacent areas, the DMZ is effectively a militarized *de facto* nature reserve. If by magic it suddenly became a nature reserve without a concurrent political breakthrough or shift in social engagement, it would serve as a buffer between antagonistic states, not as a bridge for confidence- building. Absent concurrent political or social changes, there is only a precarious basis on which to preserve the ecological assets of the DMZ. Thus, it is incumbent upon the DMZ peace park community to develop a realistic strategy to engage the DPRK directly and indirectly if it is to achieve its goals.

[caption id="attachment_32042" align="alignnone" width="342"] Graphic Presentation of Baekdudaegan Source: Korea Forest Service[/caption]


From ROK Unilateral Implementation...

Baekdudaegan (백두대간, 白头大干) is the figurative and literal mountainous spine running down the length of the Korean peninsula from Mount Baekdu, on the border with China, to the southern tip of South Korea. The mountain range has long been part of the Korean culture and influenced everything from administrative divisions to military defenses. [23] Korea has long been split into an east and west by the mountain range. However, it was only in 1953 that Korea was divided, thereby splitting the spine of Korea into two separately managed sections. The length of history the Koreans share is tremendously long compared to the relatively short 60 plus years of separation.

Thus given the DPRK’s past rebuffs, the concept of Baekdudaegan – a unifying feature of the Korean Peninsula and visible to Koreans wherever they may be on the Peninsula - provides a common cultural reference acceptable to leaders on both sides of the externally imposed cross-cutting and linear cicatrix.


Until that day comes, such a zone is desirable in its own right. To that end, the ROK has taken unilateral steps which do not preclude future DPRK interaction. For example, the ROK has elevated the concept directly into their basic ecological planning framework. As viewed by the ROK Ministry of Environment, it is one of the 3 main ecological axes for sustainability management of the ROK’s resource base—the other two being the mountainous forest ecosystems and the coastal zone ecosystems. Elsewhere, the Ministry has portrayed the three axes as being Peninsular wide (or long).[24]

To our knowledge, the ROK Government has not developed a detailed conceptual plan to extend the “green axis” northwards and into Korea. Nor has the ROK-centered DMZ peace park community managed to engage the DPRK in this process, without which it is not possible to proceed very far towards realizing the park. Nonetheless, scholars and civil society based proponents have had anticipatory dialogue with the ROK government as to post-unification management of the DMZ to stave off developing the land which supports up to 3, 541 completely a-political species. [25] It has also urged the ROK and US military to manage the DMZ in an ecologically sound manner in routine operations and to develop war-plans that minimize environmental destruction.[26]

[caption id="attachment_32043" align="alignnone" width="559"] "Crane" corridors at: <http://japanfocus.org/-Peter-Hayes/3423#sthash.RYfNw5qY.dpuf>/caption]

...To Trustpolitik and the Peace Park

Reportedly a key advisor to President Park proposed that the DMZ Peace Park be promoted as a "low politics" confidence building measure as a preliminary step toward creating real trust in the run-up to the December 2012 ROK presidential elections.^[27] In her May 9, 2013 speech to the US Congress, President Park Guen-Hye said that she hoped to "work toward an international park inside the DMZ. It will be a park that sends a message of peace to all of humanity. This could be pursued in parallel with my Trust-building Process. There, I believe we can start to grow peace—to grow trust. It would be a zone of peace bringing together not just Koreans separated by a military line, but also the citizens of the world. I call on America and the global community to join us in seeking the promise of a new day."^[28]

[caption id="attachment_32044" align="alignnone" width="559"] "Tiger" Corridors at: <http://japanfocus.org/-Peter-Hayes/3423#sthash.RYfNw5qY.dpuf>/caption]

Conclusion

That the DPRK may be interested to explore a DMZ Peace Park is still only a faint possibility, based on a remark to a Korean American businessman visiting Pyongyang - perhaps a signal in its own right - in relation to car production. Nonetheless, partial implementation of elements of the DMZ Peace Park concept might be of interest to the DPRK leadership, in order to re-engage the ROK, and to generate badly needed foreign exchange—for example, via eco-tourism. To place this in context, Yellowstone National Park generates over one billion dollars in revenue. ^[29]

Full-scale implementation likely requires a wider-angled lens, however. A politically realistic pathway to realize the DMZ peace park may be to work from the least sensitive areas to the most sensitive. This can be accomplished by embedding it in a regional network of biodiversity reserves, and slowly linking them in the far north of the DPRK on a cross-border basis between the DPRK with China and the Russian Far East, and from the far south of the ROK, working towards eventual re-connection at the Demilitarized Zone.

Such a phased approach could be synchronized with political and military steps towards reducing tension, the task of a post-Armistice, post-Military Armistice Commission, in tandem with achieving a completely nuclear weapons-free Korean Peninsula, and cooperation in establishing the more distant reserves first, while articulating the common design for linking these reserves.

Such regional, cross-border biodiversity corridors are found in many parts of the world, and all the elements exist to re-establish a "tiger corridor" stretching from Siberia to the southern tip of Korea; and a "crane corridor" stretching from Japan to Korea to Russia, China and beyond.

What's clear is that conventional, military-based security frameworks have often resulted in slow progression and sometimes regression in human security in Korea. Bolstering ecological security could break this vicious cycle by making a public good out of what is currently a very bad public bad—a highly militarized "Demilitarized Zone." In the context of inter-Korean relations, the

framework takes the shapes of a mountain, a crane and a tiger – all icons of longevity, grace and strength – common to all the cultures of Northeast Asia. The windows of opportunity when both Koreas have flexibility in dealing with each other – and establishing trust are usually open only for a short period. Re-opening Kaesong, family reunions, and a DMZ Peace Park, may embody trustpolitik for both Koreas, setting the stage for broader geo-strategic agendas that tackle the “high politics” of nuclear weapons in the region.

* Kaesong Industrial Park / Zone / Complex / Region etc are all referring to .

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[3] One of the authors, Peter Hayes, included this concept in a 14 item list of possible inter-Korean cooperation for UNDP facilitation in a report produced for UNDP Korea Desk in 1994. The ROK responded positively to the concept; the DPRK did not respond to the concept, when floated by UNDP in Pyongyang.

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