

On This Topic



Division, the Formation of Cold War Borders, and Border-Crossing

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The Demilitarized Zone, or DMZ, that bisects the Korean Peninsula is one of the most adversarial, blockaded borders in the world today. Unlike its name suggests, it is heavily militarized, with the movement of those within it subject to the strictest restrictions, thus resulting in a rupture in cultural contact as well. While efforts to breach this border have persisted ever since it came into existence, the barrier remains as fortified as ever. Why, exactly, is this border dividing North and South Korea so fortified and difficult to cross?

The border that divides North from South Korea is not simply a single boundary line, but is composed of numerous lines and areas. These overlapping boundaries of division were formed following local skirmishes along the 38th parallel prior to the outbreak of the Korean War, while also being a result of the war itself, which swept up and down the peninsula. The existence and shifting of borderlines, as well as the creation of and changes to border regions that resulted from brutal warfare and conflict, make the border dividing North and South Korea unique. This border between North and South did not suddenly spring into being as the hard border it is in the wake

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of the Korean War. Rather, it began to form starting with events along the 38th parallel before the war, then during the war as well. The border as it stands today is the product of constant changes, both physical and institutional.

The 38th Parallel: A Borderline of Rupture, Exchange, and Clashes

Immediately after its emancipation from the colonial rule of imperial Japan at the end of World War II on August 15, 1945, the Korean Peninsula was divided and occupied by US and Soviet forces. Under the pretense of disarming the Japanese military, the US and Soviet militaries divided Korea into south and north along the 38th parallel north, with the Soviets then occupying the area north of the line and the US occupying the area south of it. Until that point, the 38th parallel was a line that existed only on maps and in the minds of men, but after the war, it became a real, existing border that divided the Korean Peninsula and helped commence the Cold War on the peninsula. The conflicts and ideologies of the East-West camps were introduced along the 38th parallel, and in 1948, two adversarial governments—the Republic of Korea and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea—with differing ideologies and political systems were established in the South and North, respectively. With this, what had been a temporary border along the 38th parallel installed by the United States and the Soviet Union took on the characteristics of a concrete border separating two states.

While much was severed with the establishment of the 38th parallel as a border, there remained an inertial propulsion to maintain the longstanding shared basis of lives and culture that existed before the border was introduced. First, following liberation from Japan in 1945, more than 2 million war refugees who had traveled from the southern reaches of the Korean Peninsula into the northern regions, along with Manchuria and China, during the Japanese colonial period, returned south across the 38th parallel in search of their hometowns.¹ Among the many reasons for

1. For more on demographic shifts and changes before and after Korea's liberation, see Kwon (1977).

crossing the border into South Korea, the main motivations were opposition to or dislike of North Korea's regime, fear of punishment, food shortages, and difficulty securing a livelihood, as well as the search for medical treatment. Some who crossed the border into the South did so alone, while others traveled with their entire families. There was even commerce between North and South along the 38th parallel between 1947 and 1949. While movement across the 38th parallel was restricted, for the residents of areas that brushed up against the border, the 38th parallel was considered a layover for political choice, a line that must be crossed to find one's land or family, a border necessary to traverse to improve the condition of one's life and the food scarcity that characterized it, and even a market of commerce between the two sides. Even North and South Korea, which regulated and restricted crossing of the parallel, used the circumstances of the border to gather information.² Following independence in 1945, until the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950, the 38th parallel was an intersection of separation and exchange.

Between 1948 and 1950, military skirmishes tantamount to a civil war broke out along the 38th parallel. On the surface, these clashes appeared to be the outgrowth of antagonism between North and South Korea, but in truth, the violence was a result of the complex entanglement of the experiences of colonialism under imperial Japan, and the transposition of the Cold War brewing between the United States and the Soviet Union on to the Korean Peninsula. Following liberation, independence fighters and pro-Japan blocs reignited their battles along the 38th parallel. The division among Koreans that arose during Japan's colonial rule on the peninsula continued to exist even after Japan was no longer in power there (Cumings 2001, 346–347). This mutual antagonism became amplified within the space of the division of North and South Korea, as well as with the introduction of US and Soviet aid and the Cold War stand-off between systems. Not long after, the Korean War (June 25, 1950–July 27, 1953) broke out.

2. See Ministry of National Defense Military History Commission (1967, 415–427); Korean Central Intelligence Agency (1972, 342–344); Park (1996, 349–357); Jo and Park (1985); Lee (1986, 13); G. Kim (1999, 41–71); Hahn (2017, 184–195).

In June of 1950, North Korean forces crossed the 38th parallel en bloc. In remarkably short time, they managed to occupy nearly all of South Korea, save for one small southern corner. The tide of war turned when in October of that year South Korean and UN forces crossed the 38th parallel, marching north. Following the deployment of Chinese communist forces in the winter of 1950, South Korean and UN troops retreated from North Korea, falling back below the 38th parallel once again. Not even a full year into the three-year war, both sides of the conflict had traversed the 38th parallel a minimum of three or four times. From July 1951 all the way until the Armistice Agreement was signed in July 1953, the frontline of the war came to a stalemate in the vicinity of the 38th parallel.

The war's front at the time followed a path similar to that of today's Military Demarcation Line (MDL), snaking up and down between the 37th and 39th parallels north. When the war came to a stalemate, both sides initiated ceasefire talks. Meanwhile, in an attempt to put oneself at a slight advantage during the ceasefire talks and claim even an inch more of territory, both sides continued fighting tooth and nail along the front. All along the front, both North and South Korea constructed outposts, concentrating the deployment and use of their firepower there. Mass casualties arose, not only among North and South Korean soldiers, but among UN and Chinese troops as well. The area that comprises the DMZ we know today stands precisely where such ferocious battles took place during the Korean War, and remains a graveyard for the remains of the countless souls lost there.

Thick Border: DMZ and its Derivative Spaces

After three years of merciless war, on July 27, 1953, the Armistice Agreement was signed. The agreement spawned a new borderline dissecting the peninsula into north and south, as well as a new border area: the Military Demarcation Line (MDL) and the Demilitarized Zone. The MDL was the first borderline to separate North from South Korea following the Korean War. Intense debate took place during the armistice talks between UN and

communist forces over whether the border between the North and South would be returned to the 38th parallel that had functioned as a border before the war, or whether the delineation would be along the line of contact separating the two belligerents. In the end, it was the final front line of the war that became the MDL, not the 38th parallel. With that, the border of division between North and South went from the 38th parallel before the war, to the ceasefire line following the conflict. While the ceasefire line was drawn on maps as a continuous line, in reality, it was indicated by 1,292 sign markers.

The second border dividing North from South Korea is made up of the Northern Limit Line and the Southern Limit Line. The Armistice Agreement stipulated that forces from both sides would withdraw 2 kilometers from the MDL, creating the Southern Limit Line (SLL) in the south and the Northern Limit Line (NLL) in the north. Because entrance into this zone between the two lines is highly restricted, limited to select personnel who are permitted to come and go, the SLL and NLL serve as the de facto borderlines separating the two countries.

This zone that lies between the SLL and NLL is what is known as the Demilitarized Zone, or DMZ. In the Armistice Agreement, the DMZ was installed as a military buffer zone. In an effort to prevent renewed hostilities, it banned the establishment of military facilities and restricted personnel within the zone from carrying arms, instituting a total ban on hostilities within, starting from and aimed at the DMZ. Yet the so-called Demilitarized Zone soon became heavily armed, and hostilities between the two sides continued to be heated.

There were also a number of unusual areas created in the formation of the DMZ. When the border dividing North from South Korea switched from the 38th parallel to the DMZ, unique areas that existed in between the two lines sprang into being. These areas can be divided into two categories: the area north of the Northern Limit Line but south of the 38th parallel, and the area south of the Southern Limit Line but north of the 38th parallel. Before the Korean War, the former had been governed by South Korea, but was absorbed into North Korea in the course of the war, and were referred to by North Korea as “newly liberated areas” (*sin haebang jigu*). The latter, on

the other hand, had originally been governed by North Korea before being absorbed into South Korea during the war, and were referred to by South Korea as “reclaimed areas” (*subok jigu*).³

On the southern side of the border between North and South Korea, we also have the Civilian Control Line (CCL), and the Civilian Control Zone (CCZ, the area north of the CCL). The CCL was established 5 to 10 kilometers south of the Southern Limit Line, its basic function being that of restricting civilians from entering the military encampments and protective zones around military installations that lie in proximity to the MDL. The CCL originated from the 38th parallel (Hahn 2020a). The CCZ, with its military objective, adds yet another layer to the border regions south of the DMZ.

The border dividing North and South Korea following the Korean War stands in stark contrast to the 38th parallel that preceded the conflict. While the border along the 38th parallel was made up of roughly 80 signposts and US and Soviet troops—not to mention South and North Korean ones—stood guard and prohibited crossing of the border, still, countless people traversed the 38th parallel for a plethora of reasons. But the border was monumentally changed following the war. The existence and militarization of a ceasefire line comprising 1,292 signposts, a 4-kilometer wide Demilitarized Zone, and the Southern and Northern Limit Lines that enveloped the DMZ all made border-crossing an impossibility institutionally, physically, and psychologically. But that was not all. The areas that had once been controlled by the opposing regime prior to the war were now the closest to the opposing regime. Access to the DMZ was already restricted for the 5 to 10 kilometers south of it because of the CCL, meant to regulate admission and residence of civilians for military purposes. Anyone traveling to the DMZ would have their path blocked first at the CCL, which allowed visitations only to specifically permitted regions. In this manner, the existence and movement of numerous borders, as well as the existences and shifts of unique regions derived from these borders, has effectively made the border

3. For more on these areas between the 38th parallel and the DMZ, see Hahn (2020b) and Hahn (2017).

between North and South Korea a thick one, physically speaking. This is one crucial characteristic of the border that divides the two countries.

The multilayered physical border between the North and South has had a great impact on the formation of both the psychological and cultural boundaries between the two countries. This thick, militarized, physical border precluded even the idea of crossing it or of any meeting between the two nations. Because we are unable to experience the place across the border for ourselves, there exists only the South Korea or North Korea that we imagine. Following the 1950s, the existence of families separated by the war (*isan gajok*) and displaced peoples, as well as experiences of fleeing the devastation of war, all functioned as a crucial catalyst spurring the birth of an anti-communist nation in South Korea, and those with histories of crossing the border—north or south—were subject to scrutiny and regarded as untrustworthy (G. Kim 2010, 65–66). Despite it being a home that was longed for, the place that existed across the border was described through tales of exploitation and suffering (Hahn 2020b, 276–280). It was a place that piqued curiosity, but was described as a desolate place of no substance. Such standardized imaginaries impeded a wide array of envisioning the place across the dividing line. In this way, the fundamental blockade on border-crossing and encounters, as well as the preclusion of imagination, came into existence amidst a background of historical experience and physical separation.

Border-Crossing: Risk and Possibility

The four articles that make up this special issue illustrate the significance, as well as the impact, of the inter-Korean border and border-crossing during the Cold War era. While Monica Hahn writes about the border violations by soldiers tasked with guarding the DMZ and the instability of the ceasefire system, A Ram Kim writes about women who crossed the border into the South and their resettlement, Yu Kyung Lim examines South Korean author Kim Sok-yong's visit to North Korea, and Young Hoon Song classifies the characteristics of North Korean defectors.

In her article, “‘The Frontlines of Freedom’: The 1967 Incident at Guard Post Ouellette and the Military Armistice Commission,” Monica Hahn illustrates how the DMZ is not merely an inter-Korean border, but a border between North Korea and the United States, as well as a border between the capitalist and communist blocs. In addition, she elucidates the process of the DMZ becoming militarized from an institutional aspects and its background throughout the eras of the border’s history. In terms of the institutions that surround the border, Hahn overviews the roles and limitations of the Armistice Agreement and its follow-up agreements, and the organizations that oversee the ceasefire. Looking at the border through its history, Hahn sheds light on how the military clashes in the DMZ and the border’s militarization were an effect of the Vietnam War. Finally, Hahn uses the understudied 1967 incident at Guard Post Ouellette to shed light on the DMZ.

Guard Post Ouellette was the joint stop made by US President Donald Trump and South Korean President Moon Jae-in immediately prior to the trilateral summit at Panmunjom in June 2019. GP Ouellette lies a mere 50 meters from the Military Demarcation Line, quite literally a stone’s throw from North Korea. GP Ouellette lies within the MAC Headquarters Area that surrounds Panmunjom and the Joint Security Area, and doubles as a fortified base, meaning that it has military facilities, equipment and forces in preparation for battle. GP Ouellette became an essential stop for US presidents visiting Korea, with former US presidents Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama all having paid a visit while in office. While there, they all underscored its position as the “frontline of freedom” and stressed the superiority of liberalism and the justifications for the presence of US Forces Korea, perennially invoking the Cold War and upholding it.

The 1967 incident at GP Ouellette was a military skirmish that broke out between North Korean troops and UN—or more accurately, US—troops. At the time, three North Korean soldiers crossed (violated) the Military Demarcation Line and were detected by GP Ouellette, which immediately launched an assault. This firefight lasted over 50 minutes, resulting in five deaths, including two soldiers who were north of the MDL, and one injury. The structural explanation of the incident at GP Ouellette

can be found in the militarization of the DMZ and the Military Armistice Commission's follow-up agreements to the Armistice Agreement. Moreover, the outbreak of the Vietnam War in the 1960s and changes in the political situation on the Korean Peninsula were boiling over into military tensions on the DMZ. North Korea's provision of aid to North Vietnam and its aggression towards the South, in addition to South Korean troops being dispatched to fight for South Vietnam and President Johnson's visit to Korea, were all part of the mosaic of factors that aggravated military skirmishes on the DMZ. The incident that came to pass near MDL marker No. 0109 on April 5, 1967, was a result of these factors. When these types of armed clashes occurred on the DMZ, the Military Armistice Commission played its role as a communication channel to calm the situation, but it simultaneously repeated and exacerbated the situation. Such a limitation of the authority overseeing the ceasefire enabled the militarization of the DMZ and military skirmishes. Moreover, it was a crucial reason the ceasefire on the Korean Peninsula was maintained in such a fraught manner.

In her article, "Gendered Migration and Labor of Female Refugees before and after the Korean War," A Ram Kim sets her focus on women refugees during the period spanning from national liberation to the Korean War, with a particular interest in their experiences of border-crossing and resettlement. Kim analyzes the background that led to North Korean refugees, particularly women refugees, crossing the border south or fleeing to the South before and after the Korean War, as well as the process of resettlement that followed. She shines a light on these women's experiences working on behalf of women refugee resettlement projects in Jangheung, Jeollanam-do province, and Jeju Island. Jangheung was home to the country's largest refugee resettlement site, and as for Jeju, following the April 3 Incident and Massacre and the Korean War, there was a dire need for the reconstructing and restoring of villages. Women played an invaluable role here, rebuilding after massive destruction and death. When refugees from North Korea needed to resettle in the South, US aid organizations and the South Korean government established refugee settlement programs. Unlike other refugee resettlement programs, the one in Jeju's Beopochon did not receive any aid supplies, prompting women to gather wood and perform day

labor at mandarin orange farms. At the same time, in Jangheung, the refugee women spearheaded the resettlement efforts themselves, performing backbreaking labor to reclaim the land from the sea and turn mudflats into farmlands.

The women featured in Kim's article have continued to reside in the rural villages they constructed following their resettlement efforts, from the 1950s to the present day. In their journey from refugee to resettled, they speak of the difficulties they have faced trying to subsist off their farming, the trials and tribulations of the absence of their husbands, and their efforts to form social bonds with locals. Even as countless others left their rural homes, trading them for life in cities, these women stayed behind. The resettlement efforts that continued into the 1960s ultimately failed on account of urban-centered industrialization and the flight from Korea's rural reaches. However, in the end, these refugee women settled down in rural areas, their fastidious efforts to overcome the limitations of their given circumstances ultimately contributing to Korea's post-war reconstruction.

In her article, "The Border of Division and Politics of Encounter: A Study of Hwang Sok-yong's Visit to North Korea in 1989," Yu Kyung Lim examines the backdrop of tumultuous late-1980s Korea, when the country vacillated between the Cold War and the post-Cold War, that propelled Hwang's visit to the North, as well as the literary and political nature of his travelogue recording his time in North Korea. Using the novelist Hwang Sok-yong as a case study, Lim examines the backdrop of fiercely anti-communist, post-division Korean society against which the phenomenon of "visiting the North" occurred, taking care to investigate the historical and social implications of Hwang's journey north, elucidating the historical and cultural significance of records of visits to North Korea.

Hwang Sok-yong was the first Korean author to visit North Korea following the division of the peninsula. His visit to the North, which took place without the authorization of the South Korean government, was a historic and cultural event that illustrated how exactly the new *détente* of the 1980s was projected on the Korean Peninsula in a transformative way. As he pursued his visit in 1989, Hwang asserted that his trip north was not a political act, but purely aimed at cultural exchange. Despite the inherent

politicism in the mere act of going to North Korea, this agent carrying out the act itself was adamant about defining his actions as apolitical. While this was undoubtedly an act of self-preservation necessitated by the prevailing anti-communist sentiment in the country, as a result of his visit to North Korea, Hwang became highly lauded as a political author among Korean literary scholars and unification activists alike.

Within South Korea, the act of crossing the border and going to North Korea became known as *wolbuk*, and when those who had crossed into the North had such histories revealed, they were treated in South Korea as though they were spies for the North. But in calling his act of border-crossing “visiting North Korea” (*bangbuk*) and actively imbuing its meaning, Hwang Sok-yong found himself up to his ears in the hegemonic struggle between discourses. His travelogue played a role in changing how South Koreans perceived the cultural signs of North Korea and how they pictured their counterpart. Hwang’s record of his travels keenly highlighted the numerous political connotations implicit in the act of going to North Korea—imagining the relationship between North and South Korea as one between equals and recognizing its unique system, as well as reconstructing the context of discourses on unification. In that Hwang’s endeavor was an act of disrupting the discursive system of the powers that be, Lim reads his trip as a practice in resisting hegemony.

In his article, “Living on the Border? Human Rights and Selection Process in the Forced Migration of North Korean Defectors,” Young Hoon Song classifies the characteristics of North Korean defectors staying abroad as citizens, refugees, and migrants and argues that they have a complex identity structure. Understanding the multi-layered status of North Korean defectors residing abroad is important because the subject of their human rights protection responsibilities changes and their effects on human rights protection may change. In particular, as the types of stay of North Korean defectors diversify, there is a limit to collectively understanding them. Therefore, this study argues that when the three conceptual approaches to North Korean defectors as citizens, refugees, and migrants are used complementarily, it will be possible to contribute to the actual protection and promotion of human rights of North Korean defectors.

This study carries the following implications for promoting their human rights. First, the argument that North Korean defectors outside the Korean Peninsula should be protected as South Koreans conforms to the constitutional principle, but it is not effective in preventing China and other East Asian countries from forcibly repatriating them to North Korea. Second, the approach of collectively applying refugee agreements to North Korean defectors without considering changes in the humanitarian crisis situation in North Korea does not reflect the governments' refusal to recognize refugees by individual and period. Third, the approach to recognizing North Korean defectors as migrants must precede the cooperation of the government of the country of residence of North Korean defectors, but it has the advantage of reducing their human rights issues to the universal human rights of the country of residence.

New Border-Crossing and Border-Making

As shown above, border-crossing in North and South Korea became an event, something out of the ordinary. Such a fact demonstrates the robustness of the inter-Korean border as a barrier. At the same time, it shows us that there is a persistent propulsion towards traversing this hard border. On the first anniversary of the April Revolution of 1960, students chanted, "Let us go to the North! Come ye down to the South! Let us meet at Panmunjom!" and this slogan still holds its appeal 60 years later. Starting in the late 1980s, when the world was moving into the post-Cold War era and South Korea was in the midst of its drive for democratization, North and South Korea recognized one another and began actively pursuing contact and exchanges both governmentally and in civil society. Chung Ju-yung's cattle drive into North Korea in 1998, the Kaesong Industrial Complex project, and Mount Kumgang tourism, as well as reunions of divided families were all landmark endeavors at crossing the inter-Korean border. In 1998, Hyundai Group founder Chung Ju-yung took two trips through Panmunjom to bring 1,001 cows to North Korea. Having been born in Kangwon-do province in North Korea and displaced from his home due to

the division of Korea, Chung's gesture was aimed at contributing to reconciliation and the easing of tensions between North and South Korea.

The opening of Mount Kumgang to tourists (November 1998–July 2008), the Kaesong Industrial Complex (agreed to in 2000, suspended in 2016), and tourism in Kaesong (December 2007–November 2008) are all examples of border-crossing expanding to private sector economic exchange and tourism. Both Kaesong and Mount Kumgang lie in borderlands directly north of the DMZ. Kaesong, in particular, had been the heart of the ancient Goryeo dynasty that preceded modern-day Korea, and is home to a rich cultural heritage. It also is part of the “newly liberated areas” absorbed by North Korea following the Korean War. Mount Kumgang's rocky ridges are so renowned and highly sought after as a tourist destination that Su Shi, the celebrated Song Dynasty poet, lamented, “Were that I had been born in Goryeo, that I could see the Kumgang Mountains in person!”

Feminist peace activists from around the world also crossed the inter-Korean border. On May 24, 2015, 30 women from 15 countries across the globe crossed the DMZ, calling for an end to the Korean War and peaceful reunification. Participants organized peace symposiums in Pyongyang and Seoul, crossing the DMZ as they went from Pyongyang to Seoul to remind the world that the division could be overcome (S. Kim 2016).

But for all the endeavors to cross the border, North and South Korea also endeavored to create new borders. On September 19, 2018, the military authorities of both states recognized the gravity of military tensions and skirmishes in the inter-Korean border areas and resolved to jointly supervise the area and prevent further clashes in the inter-Korean military agreement of September 19. They established zones on land, sea, and air where hostilities would cease, promised to complete joint waterway surveys of the Han River estuary for the sake of joint use, and vowed to militarily ensure inter-Korean cultural exchange within the DMZ. For the sake of military trust-building, they agreed to tear down guard posts (GP) on a trial basis, with each side removing 11 of their guard posts. When compared with the opaque border-construction through military fortification that had taken place up until that point, this represented a groundbreaking endeavor and a change. While it remains true that such endeavors and changes are subject

to constraints due to political circumstances on the Korean Peninsula and around the world, new endeavors at border-crossing and border-making continue to take place today.

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