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**Beyond the border: The Korean DMZ between diplomacy,
collective memory and green economy**

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Riassunto

Cosa resta di una guerra che, ufficialmente, non è mai finita?

Da questa domanda si origina la presente ricerca, dedicata alla Zona Demilitarizzata coreana (DMZ).

Il 27 luglio 1953, lungo un fronte che attraversava l'intera penisola all'altezza del trentottesimo parallelo, le armi tacquero non in virtù di un trattato di pace, mai firmato fino a oggi, ma di un semplice armistizio, un cessate il fuoco concepito come provvisorio e trasformatosi, con il passare dei decenni, in una condizione permanente. Da quella sospensione nasce la DMZ, una striscia di terra lunga circa duecentocinquanta chilometri e larga quattro, che separa la Repubblica di Corea dalla Repubblica Popolare Democratica di Corea, e che a oltre settant'anni di distanza continua a dividere due popoli che condividono lingua, storia e, spesso, una stessa famiglia, rappresentando una ferita ancora aperta e mai rimarginata, segno di un conflitto congelato anziché risolto.

Il nome stesso di questo confine racchiude un profondo paradosso, infatti sebbene sia definita "demilitarizzata", la zona è in realtà uno dei confini più fortificati e sorvegliati del pianeta, fatto di filo spinato, campi minati, posti d'osservazione ed eserciti contrapposti lungo una linea che nessun civile può attraversare liberamente, ed è proprio la distanza tra ciò che la parola promette e ciò che il luogo è realmente a costituire il primo enigma della ricerca.

A esso se ne aggiunge un secondo, ancora più centrale. Poiché per oltre settant'anni l'accesso umano è stato quasi del tutto negato, la natura ha potuto riappropriarsi di uno spazio sottratto a sfruttamento, urbanizzazione e agricoltura e là dove l'uomo si è ritirato gli ecosistemi si sono ricostituiti, al punto che la DMZ è oggi considerata uno dei più importanti rifugi di biodiversità dell'Asia orientale, habitat di numerose specie rare e a rischio di estinzione.

Si evince quindi come una zona concepita per la divisione e la guerra si è in realtà trasformata, per effetto involontario, in un serbatoio di vita, ed è in questa contraddizione, luogo di guerra e insieme di rigenerazione naturale, che risiedono l'interesse e l'urgenza dell'analisi.

Da qui si origina la domanda di ricerca, ovvero, un confine tanto particolare può essere considerato un confine nel senso ordinario del termine, oppure è qualcosa di più? E che cosa resta, concretamente, di questa frontiera oltre alla sua funzione di separazione? A differenza di altri simboli della Guerra Fredda, come il Muro di Berlino, scomparso con la riunificazione

tedesca, la DMZ non è affatto svanita, ha anzi acquisito nuovi significati. La seguente tesi sostiene che essa non possa essere ridotta a una semplice linea di demarcazione geopolitica, ma vada letta come uno spazio di confine multidimensionale e stratificato, in cui si sovrappongono dimensioni storiche, simboliche, diplomatiche, ambientali, economiche e turistiche, e il cui significato eccede, a ogni livello, la funzione militare per cui è stata originariamente creata.

Il contributo più originale del lavoro consiste nell'affiancare alla necessaria ricostruzione storica, geopolitica e simbolica una linea d'analisi ancora poco dibattuta, orientata al potenziale inespresso della DMZ sul piano ambientale ed economico. Letta attraverso i paradigmi dell'economia ecologica, della green economy e dell'environmental peacebuilding, la zona si rivela una vasta riserva di capitale naturale e di servizi ecosistemici, potenziale terreno di green jobs, ecoturismo circolare e cooperazione ambientale, una prospettiva che la ha bisogno di essere approfondita senza la necessità di concepire la DMZ solo nella sua dimensione strategico-militare o diplomatica. Il contributo si articola quindi su una triplice dimensione: una riformulazione, che sposta la domanda da come il confine venga difeso o negoziato a quanto esso valga sul piano ecologico ed economico, una sintesi interdisciplinare, che mette in dialogo geografia politica, scienza della conservazione, memory studies, economia ecologica e diplomazia e una verifica sul campo dell'argomento teorico. Sul piano metodologico, la ricerca combina un'ampia rassegna interdisciplinare della letteratura, geografia politica, border studies, relazioni internazionali, studi sul turismo e governance ambientale e l'esame di fonti primarie e secondarie, dai documenti ufficiali e dai materiali storici ai contributi accademici, con una componente di ricerca diretta sul campo, che consiste in una visita personale al versante meridionale del confine, che ha permesso di confrontare la riflessione teorica con l'osservazione concreta dei luoghi e del modo in cui essi vengono presentati ai visitatori.

La ricerca si sviluppa in cinque capitoli che, più che descrivere il confine, ne esaminano progressivamente le diverse dimensioni, in primo luogo affronta la costruzione degli strumenti concettuali, il confine inteso non solo come linea di esclusione ma anche come spazio di interazione, i paesaggi della memoria, i quadri della green economy e dell'environmental peacebuilding, fino alle Zone Economiche Speciali e ai parchi eco-industriali e da una ricostruzione storica che mostra come la DMZ sia il prodotto sedimentato di una lunga sequenza, dal dominio coloniale giapponese, alla divisione del

1945, alla guerra di Corea e all' armistizio mai risolto. Ne emerge una prima tesi di fondo, ciò che fu creato per congelare un conflitto non è un oggetto fisso, bensì uno spazio continuamente riprodotto da processi politici, sociali ed ecologici, il cui significato non smette di stratificarsi. Proprio la mancata firma di un trattato di pace, e la sopravvivenza di un armistizio pensato come temporaneo, spiegano perché quella linea continui a produrre effetti umani, politici e simbolici ben oltre la funzione per cui era stata tracciata.

Su questa base, l'analisi mostra anzitutto come la DMZ funzioni simultaneamente da luogo di scontro e da palcoscenico di riconciliazione. Lo si coglie già nella diplomazia "dal basso" delle riunioni tra famiglie separate dalla guerra, riconessioni umane sempre condizionate dalle decisioni del potere e ancor più nella diplomazia "dall'alto" dei vertici inter coreani. La stessa striscia di terra che ospita altoparlanti, propaganda e guerra psicologica è stata teatro di questi incontri e, in particolare, del summit di Panmunjom del 2018, dove la stretta di mano dei due leader sopra la Linea di Demarcazione Militare e il loro reciproco attraversamento della linea hanno fatto del confine stesso il mezzo con cui inscenare la riconciliazione davanti a un pubblico globale. Questa capacità di un'unica linea di dividere e al tempo stesso connettere, di mettere in atto l'antagonismo e insieme simularne la sospensione, è incompatibile con la nozione convenzionale di frontiera e sfugge a qualsiasi lettura puramente militare. Negli anni successivi questi gesti si sono consolidati e la zona è divenuta un palcoscenico geopolitico globale, su cui si è affacciata, in alcune occasioni, la stessa diplomazia statunitense.

Un secondo livello emerge quando la zona viene osservata come paesaggio turistico e memoriale. Attraverso il dark tourism e i siti del versante meridionale, come il Terzo Tunnel d'Infiltrazione o il Dora Observatory, la DMZ è diventata un oggetto di rappresentazione e di valore economico, attraverso cui una nazione divisa racconta se stessa ai propri cittadini e al mondo e un confine non soltanto sorvegliato, ma anche visitato, fotografato e venduto come patrimonio, in cui il trauma della divisione è reso leggibile e, in parte, consumabile. Il turismo si rivela così anche uno strumento di soft power, attraverso cui il Sud comunica al mondo la propria versione della storia. La marcata asimmetria tra un Sud accessibile e ampiamente documentato e un Nord chiuso conferma, ancora una volta, che lo stesso paesaggio produce significati divergenti a seconda del sistema politico che lo inquadra.

È però l'ultima dimensione a costituire il cuore originale del lavoro, che legge la DMZ non

come faglia geopolitica, ma come risorsa strategica per lo sviluppo sostenibile e la transizione ecologica dell'intera penisola. Proprio perché sigillato per dividere, questo corridoio ecologico involontario è diventato un eccezionale rifugio di biodiversità, uno spazio in cui sopravvivono specie rare e minacciate ormai scomparse altrove nella penisola. Tale rigenerazione, tradotta in termini economici e politici, può essere riformulata come valore misurabile, dalla valutazione dei servizi ecosistemici ai modelli di ecoturismo circolare, dal riconoscimento ambientale internazionale alla green diplomacy, intesa come canale di cooperazione "di bassa politica" capace di attivarsi proprio quando il negoziato "di alta politica" è bloccato. Inserita nel quadro del Green New Deal sudcoreano, questa lettura lascia intravedere un tangibile "dividendo di pace" per territori a lungo penalizzati dalla loro prossimità al confine. Qui, tuttavia, l'analisi individua il nodo decisivo, ovvero, tale potenziale non è ancora una realtà, ma una possibilità latente. La persistente tensione geopolitica, quella "guerra silenziosa" che permane sotto l'apparente immobilità del confine, e il regime di sanzioni contro la Corea del Nord paralizzano ogni cooperazione transfrontaliera, trasformando in una risorsa di fatto sospesa un patrimonio che, in linea di principio, appartarrebbe a entrambe le Coree e che solo un mutamento delle condizioni politiche potrebbe rendere davvero accessibile.

Le diverse dimensioni analizzate convergono nel mostrare la natura profondamente multidimensionale della DMZ.

Ciò che resta di una guerra non conclusa non è soltanto un confine altamente militarizzato e divisivo, ma una Zona Demilitarizzata che è insieme palcoscenico diplomatico, paesaggio della memoria e del turismo e, soprattutto, riserva ecologica involontaria di considerevole valore ambientale ed economico. La trasformazione della zona da spazio di pace "negativa", di mera assenza di ostilità, in spazio di pace "positiva", fatto di cooperazione e gestione condivisa, richiede però un grado di distensione politica oggi assente.

La tesi colloca infine il caso coreano in un quadro più ampio e di rinnovata attualità, la relazione tra linea di divisione, rigenerazione ecologica involontaria e possibilità di cooperazione si ritrova nella European Green Belt, sorta lungo l'ex Cortina di Ferro, e nella zona cuscinetto di Cipro, anch'essa divenuta rifugio involontario di biodiversità e nei parchi della pace transfrontalieri che dimostrano che simili patrimoni ecologici comuni possono essere convertiti in strumenti di riconciliazione, là dove esista la volontà politica di farlo. La DMZ offre così una duplice lezione, sia di cautela, il valore ecologico non basta infatti a superare un conflitto irrisolto, che costruttiva, poiché un territorio nato dalla divisione può

accumulare nel tempo risorse, significati e opportunità che, dove maturino le condizioni politiche, potrebbero diventare strumenti di cooperazione.

Ciò che la ricerca intende stabilire è che quel potenziale esiste, che è radicato nella realtà materiale del territorio, e che riconoscerlo è sicuramente già di per sé, un primo passo necessario.

Sul piano teorico, il lavoro contribuisce così a superare una lettura semplicemente binaria del confine, fatta di separazione contro cooperazione, in favore di una sua comprensione graduale e processuale. Su quello pratico, invece, suggerisce che il valore di individuare un simile potenziale non dipende dalla sua realizzazione immediata, ma dalla capacità di tenerlo pronto per il momento in cui le condizioni politiche lo renderanno eventualmente percorribile.

Introduction

What remains of a war that, officially, has never ended?

On 27 July 1953, along a front that crossed the entire Korean Peninsula at the level of the thirty-eighth parallel, weapons were officially laid down (Cumings, 2010). Regrettably, this came about not by virtue of a peace treaty, the treaty that, to this day, has never been signed, but of a mere armistice, of a ceasefire conceived as provisional and transformed, with the passing of the decades, into a permanent condition. From that suspension was born the Korean Demilitarized Zone, commonly known by the acronym DMZ, a strip of land roughly two hundred and fifty kilometers long and about four kilometers wide, separating the Republic of Korea from the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (Seth, 2019).

More than seventy years later, that line still exists and, still guarded, finds itself fulfilling the harsh role of dividing two peoples who share a language, a history and, in many cases, a family. The DMZ is, in this sense, a veritable open wound, a tangible sign of a conflict frozen rather than resolved.

And yet the very name of this border zone conceals a paradox. Although it is termed "demilitarized," it is in reality one of the most fortified and militarily surveilled borders on the entire planet. Surrounded by barbed wire, minefields, observation posts and armies deployed on both sides of a demarcation line, the DMZ is an isolated place, charged with diplomatic and geopolitical tension, that no civilian may cross freely. The term, which ought in fact to evoke the absence of weapons, describes, in concrete terms, one of the densest concentrations of military power in the world; and it is precisely this gap, between what the word promises and what the place is, that constitutes the first, fundamental enigma running through the entire research.

Complicating this paradoxical picture still further is a circumstance as unexpected as it is significant. Precisely because, for over seventy years, human access to this band of territory has been almost entirely denied, nature has been able to reclaim a space withdrawn from common human transformative practices such as exploitation, urbanization and intensive agriculture; and so, where the human presence withdrew, ecosystems reformed. The DMZ is today regarded as one of the most significant biodiversity refuges in East Asia, a habitat for

numerous rare and threatened species that elsewhere have seen their vital spaces drastically contract and which have for this reason entered the Red Lists of species at risk of extinction (National Institute of Ecology, 2018; National Atlas of Korea, 2020). One thus observes how a zone conceived for division and war has been transformed, through an involuntary side effect, into a vessel of life and ecological peace. It is also in this profound contradiction, a place of war and, at the same time, a place of natural regeneration, that the interest and the urgency of analysis of the present study reside.

From here takes shape the research question that guides this work, namely, can a border as particular as that of the DMZ be considered a border in the ordinary sense of the term, or is it something more? And further, if the DMZ is a still-living sign of the Cold War, being one of its last surviving frontiers, what concretely remains of this border today, beyond its function of separation? Unlike other emblematic symbols of the Cold War, such as the Berlin Wall, which vanished with German reunification, the DMZ has by no means disappeared, on the contrary, it has acquired new meanings and new interpretations. The present thesis proceeds from the conviction that the Korean Demilitarized Zone cannot be reduced to a simple line of geopolitical demarcation, but must be read as a multidimensional border space, a veritable stratified object in which historical, symbolic, diplomatic, environmental, economic and tourism-related dimensions overlap, difficult to separate one from another.

The relevance of the perspective adopted in the course of this analysis is situated not only on a historical or documentary plane. The Cold War, as the great ideological frame of the twentieth century, has been formally over for several decades, yet in the DMZ its material memory is still vividly preserved, making it an almost unique case study in the world. To ask what remains of this border therefore means to investigate not only the past, but also the future, and what that strip of land might become should the conditions of conflict that generate it loosen or even cease altogether. It is here that the research conducted intends to locate its most original contribution. Alongside the necessary historical, geopolitical and symbolic reconstruction, it introduces an innovative line of analysis, oriented toward the untapped potential of the DMZ in environmental and economic terms, with particular attention to the paradigms of the green economy and of ecotourism. This analysis recognizes in the DMZ a reservoir of natural capital and ecosystem services, which could transform it into a possible site of green jobs, of circular ecotourism and of environmental peacebuilding (Ide, 2019). This is an approach still relatively little explored by a literature that

tends to privilege primarily the strategic-military dimension or the strictly diplomatic one, and which, for precisely this reason, can offer a fresh perspective on an object that is in many respects already extensively studied.

As regards the methodological plane, the research rests on a plurality of complementary sources and approaches. In particular, in the first place, it presents a broad interdisciplinary review of the existing literature, integrating theoretical perspectives drawn from political geography, border studies, international relations, tourism studies and environmental governance, set alongside documentary and historical sources on the division of Korea, on the nature of the border and on the environmental characteristics of the zone. This bibliographic enquiry is accompanied by a component of direct field research, consisting of a personal visit to the places discussed¹, which made it possible to integrate theoretical knowledge with concrete observation and to grasp concrete aspects of the territory, such as its atmosphere and the way in which it is presented to visitors. It is precisely on these foundations, finally, that an analytical framework is built, aimed at interrogating the potential of the DMZ beyond its current and official function, placing historical, geopolitical and symbolic reflection in dialogue with the categories of sustainable economics and environmental tourism.

The thesis is articulated, consistently with this design, into five chapters. The first chapter establishes the theoretical framework and conceptual foundations of the research and, rather than turning immediately to the Korean case, it defines the principal analytical tools through which the DMZ will subsequently be examined, namely the relationship between borders and territorial sovereignty and the conception of borders as spaces of exclusion, inclusion and interaction, also providing the principal basic notions on which the concrete analysis of the Korean case has rested, including the contribution of economic geography, with reference to Special Economic Zones (SEZs), their "green" variants included.

In the second chapter, the historical origins of the Korean DMZ have been reconstructed, retracing the trajectory that, from Japanese colonial rule, then led to the division of the peninsula, through liberation and occupation, the emergence of two opposing political

¹ The author conducted a field visit to the South Korean side of the DMZ on 11 December 2025, visiting the Imjingak complex and its annexed sites, the Third Infiltration Tunnel, the Dora Observatory and Dorasan Station, as part of a guided tour operated by *Seoul City Tour*. Observations gathered during this visit inform the analysis developed in Chapter 4.

systems, the rising tensions that culminated in the Korean War, and the 1953 armistice that gave rise to the zone itself. It closes by reformulating the DMZ as it appears today, no longer a mere buffer zone of a military nature, but a multidimensional border space in which military, political, diplomatic and symbolic dimensions converge.

The analysis conducted then concentrates on the examination of the DMZ as a political and symbolic landscape, that is, as a place of controlled interaction between the two Koreas. It considers diplomacy "from below," through family reunions and human reconnection, and diplomacy "from above," through the inter-Korean summits, with particular attention to the 2018 Panmunjom summit and the symbolic redefinition of the border, to the Joint Security Area, to the dynamics of propaganda and psychological warfare, and to the progressive globalization of the DMZ as a stage for international politics.

In the fourth chapter the DMZ is interpreted in its sense as a tourist and memorial landscape. The research concentrates on the memorialization of the Korean War and on the principal tourist sites on the South Korean side of the border, among them the Imjingak complex and the Dora Observatory, examining the commercialization and tourist consumption of the area, the perceptions of domestic and international visitors, the role of tour guides in shaping such perceptions, and the opposing North Korean perspective on tourism in the DMZ.

Finally, the fifth and last chapter develops the original analytical contribution of the work, in that it reads the DMZ not as a geopolitical and military fault line, but as a strategic site for the sustainable development and ecological transition of the entire peninsula. Starting from the spontaneous regeneration of this involuntary ecological corridor, the chapter brings to light the extraordinary potential of the zone in terms of the green economy and ecotourism, that of a reservoir of natural capital which, suitably valorized, could translate into ecosystem services, models of sustainable tourism and new economic opportunities for territories long penalized by isolation. Precisely at the moment when this potential is recognized, however, one of the central knots of the analysis emerges, its full realization remains impeded by the situation of geopolitical tension on the peninsula. The state of conflict never truly ended, that "silent war" persisting beneath the apparent immobility of the border, and the consequent regime of international sanctions against North Korea effectively paralyze any project of cross-border cooperation, transforming a potentially shared patrimony into a suspended

promise (UNSC, 2017)². It is in this fracture, between what the DMZ could offer and what circumstances permit it to be, that the chapter locates its own argumentative core.

Anticipating here only the direction in which the reflection moves, it can be affirmed that the DMZ reveals itself to be far more than a simple border. Through the analysis of all the factors that constitute it, not merely the military ones, and going beyond its mere dividing function, it appears as a significant and extremely interesting case, a veritable natural, and potentially economic, patrimony of extraordinary value for ecotourism and for a model of sustainable development. A place that, nonetheless, remains largely inaccessible and unrealized so long as the limits, the tensions and the state of conflict that paradoxically made its existence possible endure. It is from this unresolved tension, between what the DMZ is today and what it might yet become, that the following pages take their point of departure, reserving for the conclusion the full articulation of this perspective.

² UN Security Council Resolutions 2270 (2 March 2016), 2321 (30 November 2016) and 2375 (11 September 2017), adopted in response to the DPRK's nuclear and ballistic missile tests, introduced comprehensive sectoral sanctions; Resolution 2375 in particular prohibits all joint ventures and cooperative entities with North Korean individuals or entities.

Chapter 1

Theoretical framework and conceptual foundations

Before delving into the case study itself, it is necessary to outline the theoretical foundations of the research, for this reason, the first chapter introduces the main concepts and approaches that will be used throughout the analysis of the Korean Demilitarized Zone.

In fact, the purpose of this first chapter is to establish the theoretical framework necessary for the development of the present research.

Considering the multidimensional nature of the Korean Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) and given the aim of this study to explore the multiple dimensions that characterizes this space beyond its mere role as a border of division, the analysis requires the integration of different theoretical perspectives drawn from political geography, border studies, international relations, tourism studies and environmental governance.

Consequently, rather than focusing directly on the Korean case, this initial framework aims to define the main theoretical tools through which the DMZ will be examined throughout the research.

1.1 Borders and territorial sovereignty

The emergence of the modern international system is closely connected to the consolidation of the Modern State and the consequent establishment of territorial sovereignty. A fundamental turning point in this process is commonly identified in the Peace of Westphalia³ of 1648, which marked the end of the Thirty Years' War⁴, laying the foundations for a new political, and social, order in Europe.

Through the mutual recognition of territorial sovereignty among states and most of all of the principle of non-interference in domestic affairs, the so-called Westphalia system established the modern political organization regularized around territorially defined entities.

Within this political order, the relationship between three fundamental elements, that is territory, authority and population became central and strongly interconnected. Indeed, the

³ Peace of Westphalia refers to the treaties of 1648 signed in Münster and Osnabrück. They are considered the basis of the modern international system, which admit the principle of non-interference and territorial sovereignty.

⁴ Series of conflicts between 1618 and 1648. Originated in the Holy Roman Empire as a religious conflict between Protestants and Catholics it later became a political struggle for hegemony in Europe between the House of Habsburg and the anti-imperial powers.

consolidation of centralized forms of power led to the progressive alignment between territory, state authority and the population exposed to that authority contributing to the creation of what is now known as the modern nation -state.

Precisely, in this context, borders acquired a crucial role in the definition of the spatial limits in which the political authority could have been applied, contributing also in the organization of relations between States.

We live in a world of lines and compartments. We may not necessarily see the lines, but the truth is that they structure everyday life, organize political and social spaces and strengthen our belonging to places and groups (Newman, 2006).

Since the stabilization of the modern state system, political authority has always been linked to the control of delimited and clearly defined spatial territories and so, in this context, borders play a fundamental role in putting the limits of a state sovereignty and in creating relations between political actors, shaping the foundations of the international system itself.

The modern international order can be understood as structured around territorial divisions (*Ibidem*).

Despite the increasing interconnection associated with globalization, that has facilitated flows of capital, information but also people across national boundaries and consequent suggestion of globalization narratives of the emergence of a “*borderless world*”⁵, it is not possible to think about a world which is borderless or deterritorialized (*Ibidem*).

Therefore, borders represent one of the central institutional elements of the modern international system.

As mentioned before within the modern international system, borders cover a fundamental role in organizing political space and its linked power.

Traditionally they have been conceived primarily as lines of separation of distinct political territories and a definition of the limits of every state authority. Through these territorial divisions States are able to establish their own jurisdiction and regulate all the political, economic and social activities within their boundaries.

In this sense borders can be understood as *mechanisms of separation* that distinguish one political community from another, by delineating territorial limits, they make a clear

⁵ Concept that became very influential during the debate about globalization in the 1990s, in particular through the contribution of Kenichi Ohma. He pointed out that national borders were progressively losing their relevance due to economic globalization.

distinction between the internal space of a State and the external, that coincides with the international environment (Paasi, 1998).

From this perspective borders also function as instruments through which every State regulates access to its own territory and controls mobility, in fact they are the tools through which governments manage flows of people and capitals, while also reinforcing the distinction between those who belong to a political community and those who remain outside that border.

Nowadays, borders are undergoing a process of “vacillation” and also “multiplication”⁶, in the sense that they are no longer situated merely at the edges of territories but dislocated throughout the political space, acting as selective filters that determine who is a “*citizen*” and who is an “*other*” (Balibar, 2002).

Building on this perspective, the function of borders extends beyond their role as geographical markers, they do represent institutional structures that support the organization and the application of territorial sovereignty, contributing in the maintenance of political orders within the State and by dividing political entities and defining the limits of authority, borders are central instruments through which states create their own reality and exercise power.

1.1.1 Borders as spaces of exclusion and inclusion

Contemporary border studies increasingly emphasize that borders should not be understood just merely as fixed territorial lines, but as social construction shaped by political and cultural processes.

In fact, in the last 3 decades, scholars have increasingly moved away from understanding borders as fixed geographical markers, focusing instead their attention on the process through which they are constructed and kept within the society (Newman, 1998).

From this perspective, borders contribute to the construction of identities and forms of belonging within a certain society and as scholars have pointed out, without boundaries distinction could not exist and identities could not clearly define themselves in relation to the others (Cella, 2006).

⁶ Borders are increasingly spread within the society through systems of surveillance, migration controls and regulations, expanding the physical edge of the State.

It can therefore be deduced that borders can no longer be conceived merely as lines aimed at delimiting a territory.

The traditional conception of the Roman *limes*⁷, as a mere defensive barrier, has evolved into borders that define belonging within a specific social and political community, one that shares values, beliefs and also traditions. Borders establish criteria that determine inclusion and exclusion, allowing access to rights, resources and forms of political participation and belonging.

Moreover, boundaries do not necessarily exist only in geographical space, rather they can emerge and permeate multiple dimensions, ranging from the social to the cultural and symbolic, shaping and reinforcing distinctions between groups and individuals even in the absence of a clearly demarcated territorial line (Cuttitta, 2007).

1.1.2 Borders as spaces of interaction

So, while traditional approaches, especially in the past, have largely interpreted borders as lines of separation, more recent scholarship has emphasized their role as spaces of interaction, negotiation and also encounter.

In accordance with this view, borders are not only sites where division is enforced, but also zones in which different actors and realities intersect.

The study of international boundaries should move beyond a purely static understanding of borders and instead focus on the practices and processes that occur at and across them. They can thus be understood as spaces of interaction where different exchanges take place and where forms of diplomacy are enacted on a daily basis (Meogoran, 2012).

From this perspective, borders are not simply lines but “*processes and practices that are continually made and remade*” (*Ibidem*).

These interactions are not just limited to formal diplomatic relations between different States but they also include meetings and interactions between individuals and communities operating across borders.

In this sense, borders become sites of what can be defined as border diplomacy, where various realities, made of conflicts, negotiations, cooperations measures co-exist.

⁷ The frontier system during the Roman Empire made fortifications and defensive infrastructures necessary to the imperial borders.

In particular, political encounters at borders may take multiple forms, ranging from institutional agreements and cross-border governance to informal practices and local interactions.

As a result, borders are continuously shaped and reshaped through these encounters, reflecting broader power relations and geopolitical dynamics.

Similarly borders should be understood as dynamic and relational spaces rather than fixed entities and despite a new conception of a “*borderless world*”, borders have not disappeared, they surely have been transformed and reconfigured. They still exist, while their meaning and functions have evolved, becoming increasingly complex and multi-layered (Brambilla, 2015). This leads to the conceptualization of the border as a “*borderscape*”⁸, since it suggests that the border is not a static line but a moving space of relations, a proper landscape where political hegemony and social practices intersect. By considering the border as a “*scape*”, it becomes a productive zone where national identities and diplomatic narratives are constantly negotiated and faced (*Ibidem*).

So, borders represent simultaneously a reality of division and connection, where processes of inclusion and exclusion intersect with practices of exchange and interaction.

This dual nature that highlights both a barrier and a contact zone, challenges traditional dichotomies between separation and connection.

Within the theoretical framework outlined so far, the Korean Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) can be understood as a particularly relevant example of the multidimensional nature of contemporary borders. As will be shown throughout this research, the DMZ embodies many of the dynamics discussed in this chapter, ranging from division and exclusion to interaction and negotiation.

1.2 Collective memory and memory landscapes

Following the understanding of borders not only as political lines but also as socially constructed spaces, it becomes necessary to consider their symbolic and also mnemonic dimensions. Borders often crystallize historical experience and collective identities, functioning as sites where past events are preserved and contested over time.

In this sense, the analysis of collective memory provides a crucial framework for understanding how border regions acquire meaning beyond their geopolitical function.

⁸ Concept that emphasizes the multidimensional nature of borders, comprehended as a dynamic space shaped by political and social interactions and just as a territorial line.

The concept of collective memory is defined, first and foremost, through its necessary distinction from historical knowledge. While history aspires to universal objectivity and an external chronological classification, collective memory constitutes a “*living current of thought*,” shaped by social groups that preserve from the past only what remains meaningful in the present. Memory is therefore selective and dynamic, continuously reinterpreted according to the needs and identities of communities. This implies that collective memory does not simply reproduce the past, but actively constructs it within social frameworks (Halbwachs, 2001).

However, the relationship between memory and truth is not free from tensions. There is an intrinsic ambiguity of collective memory: although it is essential for the construction of communal identity, “political contingencies” may foster the development of “mutilated memories” or selective strategies of remembrance, particularly in relation to traumatic events (Nora, 1989). Memory may thus become a contested field, where different actors negotiate narratives that shape collective understanding. In politically sensitive contexts, such as divided territories, memory can therefore function both as a tool of recognition and as an instrument of ideological construction.

To counter the fragility of social memory, remembrance often requires spatial anchoring. Drawing on Pierre Nora’s concept of *lieux de mémoire*⁹ memory becomes concretized through physical places that preserve historical experiences once living tradition begins to fade. These sites of memory act as symbolic anchors, connecting past and present and allowing communities to maintain continuity with their historical narratives. Memory, in this sense, is not only transmitted through discourse, but also embedded within landscapes, monuments and spatial practices¹⁰.

From this perspective, landscapes themselves may function as repositories of memory. Collective memory can be inscribed in physical environments where historical events leave visible or symbolic traces. The built environment and everyday spaces contribute to shaping collective remembrance, transforming landscapes into multilayered sites where different narratives coexist. These memory landscapes include both monumental structures, which

⁹ Nora, P. (1984–1992). *Les lieux de mémoire*. Paris: Gallimard. Nora defines *lieux de mémoire* as sites where collective memory is crystallized and preserved through material, symbolic and functional dimensions.

¹⁰ On the relationship between memory and space, see Bachelard, G. (1957). *La poétique de l’espace*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France. Following Bachelard, memory becomes more stable when anchored to physical space, reinforcing the role of places in sustaining collective remembrance.

often reflect official narratives, and vernacular spaces, where individual and local experiences challenge dominant interpretations (Gould and Silverman, 2013).

Monumental landscapes are typically characterized by state-sanctioned memorials designed to impose shared narratives, while vernacular landscapes emerge through everyday traces that reflect lived experiences. In addition, ecological environments may also function as forms of ‘involuntary memory’, where the absence of human intervention preserves a pre-conflict topography, offering a biological continuity that transcends political division. These different dimensions highlight how memory landscapes are dynamic and contested, shaped by political, social and cultural processes.

Within this theoretical framework, border regions represent particularly complex memory landscapes, where political divisions intersect with layered historical narratives. Borders not only separate territories but also accumulate memories of conflict, cooperation and identity formation. They become spaces where competing interpretations of the past coexist and where collective identities are continuously negotiated.

In this sense, the Korean Demilitarized Zone can be understood as a paradigmatic example of a memory landscape, shaped by divergent narratives, historical trauma and symbolic representations that continue to influence political and social relations.

Consequently, the DMZ evolves from a mere scar of conflict into a layered palimpsest of memories and identities and interactions.

1.3 Green diplomacy and environmental peacebuilding

The environmental dimension of borders has gained increasing relevance within contemporary international relations, in particular in light of the transboundary nature of modern ecological challenges.

The modern world is characterized by a pressing issue, climate change which, involving biodiversity loss, ecosystem degradation and a huge reduction of natural environments, does not conform to political boundaries, but rather it extends across territories, recalling forms of strong cooperation and coordination that go beyond the traditional state-centered approach.

In this sense, environmental issues introduce a new attitude in the study of borders, shifting the focus from division and control to interdependence and shared responsibility.

In this context, the concept of environmental peacebuilding¹¹ has emerged as a theoretical approach that examines the relationship between ecological cooperation and conflict transformation.

Environmental peacebuilding refers to the processes through which shared environmental worries could promote dialogue and a reduction of tensions, contributing at the same time to the creation and stabilization of relations between actors who are politically divided (Ide, 2019) . In fact, due to the fact that environmental concerns often transcend borders, it is necessary to manage them through forms of coordination and interaction that may create opportunities for communication even, and especially, in contexts marked by conflict or political fragmentation and distance.

1.3.1 Environmental scarcity and conflict

The relationship between environmental factors and conflict has been widely debated within the academic literature, particularly since the 1990s. One of the most influential approaches is the theory of environmental scarcity, which suggests that the depletion or unequal distribution of natural resources can contribute to the outbreak of violent conflict (Homer-Dixon, 1999). According to this perspective, environmental degradation, population growth, and unequal access to resources interact to produce different forms of scarcity, namely supply-induced¹², demand-induced¹³, and structural scarcity¹⁴.

These dynamics can generate social tensions, weaken state institutions, and increase the likelihood of violence, particularly in already fragile contexts. However, the environmental scarcity thesis has been subject to criticism for overemphasizing environmental factors while underestimating political and institutional variables (Gleditsch, 1998). In many cases, resource scarcity does not lead directly to conflict but is mediated by governance structures. This suggests that while scarcity can act as a stressor, the focus should shift toward how these resources are managed. This transition from "scarcity as a threat" to "management as an

¹¹ It emerged as a field after the 1990s, with a focus on the potential role of shared environmental management in reducing tensions and the promotion of cooperation in conflict-prone regions.

¹² This type occurs when the overall availability of a resource declines, creating a mismatch between what is accessible and what is needed.

¹³ This form of scarcity arises when population growth or increased consumption raises demand, while the availability of resources does not change, resulting in shortages.

¹⁴ This form of scarcity stems from unequal distribution of resources within a society, rather than from an actual reduction in their total quantity.

opportunity" provides the foundation for exploring environmental cooperation as a tool for stability.

1.3.2 From environmental cooperation to green diplomacy

In contrast to the scarcity approach, a significant strand of literature emphasizes the potential of ecological issues to promote cooperation. Environmental cooperation is based on the premise that shared ecological problems, such as climate change, biodiversity loss, or transboundary water management, transcend political boundaries and require collective action (Conca and Dabelko, 2002).

This perspective leads to the concept of Green Diplomacy, which uses environmental issues as a functional platform for dialogue in contexts where "high-politics" (security, sovereignty) are deadlocked. Environmental initiatives are often perceived as "low-politics" interactions, allowing conflicting parties to communicate on technical and scientific grounds. By facilitating these interactions, Green Diplomacy may help to reduce mistrust and create opportunities for confidence-building measures (Conca and Wallace, 2009). In divided territories, environmental cooperation serves as an entry point for broader political engagement, creating "habits of cooperation" that can eventually spill over into other diplomatic arenas.

1.3.3 Environmental peacebuilding and the "peace dividend"

Environmental peacebuilding systematically integrates environmental management into conflict prevention and post-conflict recovery (Ide, 2019). Within this framework, peace is understood as a multidimensional phenomenon that includes the development of cooperative institutions and the strengthening of socio-economic capabilities.

A central mechanism of environmental peacebuilding is the identification of specific mechanisms through which environmental cooperation may influence peace dynamics, such as the avoidance of resource conflicts and the building of trust between actors. Shared environmental challenges can incentivize cooperation by creating mutual interests among conflicting parties. This cooperation, in turn, may foster trust-building processes and encourage more stable forms of interaction (Ide, 2019). However, for environmental peacebuilding to move beyond temporary diplomatic dialogue and achieve long-term stability, it must be supported by a solid material and economic foundation.

This consideration leads to the examination of the Green Economy as a structural component of environmental peacebuilding.

1.3.4 Theoretical foundations of the green economy: the economic pillar of peace

To understand how environmental management can transition from simple cooperation to a structural engine for peace, it is necessary to examine the theoretical foundations of the Green Economy. This paradigm emerged as a response to the failures of the traditional "brown economy," which externalizes environmental costs and relies on infinite growth within a finite ecosystem.

At its core, the Green Economy is grounded in the principles of Ecological Economics. Authors like Herman Daly (1996) argue that the economy is a subsystem of the Earth's ecosystem; therefore, economic development must respect "planetary boundaries"¹⁵ and regenerative rates of natural resources. In a post-conflict or divided context, this theoretical shift is revolutionary: it moves the focus from the *extraction* of wealth (which often triggers conflict) to the *regeneration* of shared natural assets. According to the UNEP¹⁶ (2011) definition, a Green Economy is "low carbon, resource efficient, and socially inclusive."

Theoretically, this is supported by the "Triple Bottom Line"¹⁷ framework (Elkington, 1994), which posits that sustainability must balance economic viability, social equity, and environmental protection. In divided territories, the "social equity" component becomes a tool for reconciliation, a Green Economy approach ensures that the benefits of natural resource management are distributed across the border, preventing "resource capture" by elite groups.

¹⁵ The concept identifies a set of biophysical thresholds within which humanity can operate safely; their transgression risks abrupt and potentially irreversible environmental change. It is generally traced back to Rockström et al. (2009).

¹⁶ Acronym of United Nations Environment Programme.

¹⁷ A framework, introduced by John Elkington, according to which performance should be assessed against three dimensions, economic, social and environmental ("profit, people, planet"), rather than financial results alone.

Figure 1. *The Triple Bottom Line framework: the intersection of social, environmental, and economic sustainability.*



Source: UNEP - United Nations Environment Programme (2025) / <https://www.unep.org/greeneconomy>

1.3.5 Green interdependence and natural capital valuation

The integration of Green Economy into peacebuilding strategies introduces the concept of "*Green Interdependence*." Unlike traditional trade, which can be asymmetrical, a Green Economy creates a symbiotic relationship based on shared ecological risks and rewards through specific mechanisms:

1. *Natural Capital Valuation:* The "total economic value" of the environment, a Green Economy recognizes that ecosystems provide "services" (water purification, carbon sequestration, climate regulation) that have immense monetary value. In the context of a border zone, this means shifting the perception of the area from a "dead zone" to a "natural bank" of assets that both parties have an economic interest in protecting (Pearce and Turner, 1990).
2. *Decoupling and Resilience:* The Green Economy aims at "decoupling" economic growth from environmental degradation. By focusing on shared renewable energy grids or sustainable agriculture, states can reduce their dependence on scarce resources, thereby mitigating the stressors that trigger conflict.

3. *Circular Economy as Cooperation*: The application of circular economy principles transforms transboundary pollution into a shared industrial opportunity. Joint waste-to-energy projects or water recycling systems turn a shared problem into a mutual economic gain, fostering a framework where the return to military tension would entail devastating economic losses for both sides.

1.4 Economic Geography and Special Economic Zones

1.4.1 The spatial organization of economic relations

Economic geography provides a fundamental framework for understanding how economic activities are distributed across space and how they interact with political, social, and environmental factors. Rather than considering space as a neutral container, economic geography conceptualizes it as a socially constructed and dynamic dimension shaped by power relations and institutional arrangements (Harvey, 2001).

In the New Economic Geography (NEG) framework, economic spatiality is driven by the tension between "centripetal" forces (agglomeration) and "centrifugal" forces (dispersion) (Krugman, 1991)¹⁸.

In border regions, these forces are often distorted by political barriers. Borders, in this sense, act as "discontinuities" in the economic landscape. However, as suggested, the globalized era has led to the emergence of "border zones" as strategic frontier spaces where national sovereignty is unbundled, allowing for new forms of economic territoriality that transcend the binary logic of the nation-state (Saskia Sassen, 2013).

1.4.2 Special Economic Zones (SEZs) as spaces of economic innovation

One of the most significant tools used to reshape economic space is the establishment of Special Economic Zones (SEZs). SEZs are geographically defined areas where business and trade laws differ from the rest of the national territory (Farole and Akinci, 2011). While traditionally designed to promote industrialization and attract Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), SEZs have evolved into "policy laboratories."

Beyond their fiscal incentives, SEZs function as "extra-territorial" spaces where governments can test reforms without destabilizing the entire national economy. This "enclave" nature is

¹⁸ A theoretical approach, associated with Paul Krugman, that explains the spatial concentration of economic activity through the interplay of centripetal forces (agglomeration) and centrifugal forces (dispersion, e.g. congestion and immobile factors).

particularly relevant in transition economies (World Bank, 2008). However, the traditional SEZ model, often criticized for labor exploitation and "race-to-the-bottom" deregulation (Chang, 2008), is currently undergoing a paradigm shift.

1.4.3 Green Special Economic Zones and eco-industrial parks

In the context of the global transition toward sustainability, the traditional SEZ model is being replaced by Green Special Economic Zones and Eco-Industrial Parks (EIPs). According to UNIDO¹⁹ (2017), an Eco-Industrial Park is a community of manufacturing and service businesses located on a common property where member businesses seek enhanced environmental, economic, and social performance through collaboration in managing environmental and resource issues.

This theoretical evolution is crucial for environmental peacebuilding. A "Green SEZ" does not merely offer tax breaks; it provides an infrastructure based on circular economy principles, renewable energy sharing, and shared waste management systems. In conflict-prone borderlands, Green SEZs transform the "barrier" of the border into a "filter" for sustainable development. This model aligns the economic geography of the region with its ecological needs, ensuring that economic growth does not deplete the "Natural Capital" (Pearce & Turner, 1990) discussed in previous sections.

1.4.4 Special Economic Zones as instruments of diplomacy: the case of Kaesong

In politically sensitive contexts, SEZs take on a diplomatic dimension, acting as "functional bridges." The Kaesong Industrial Complex (KIC)²⁰ serves as a paradigmatic, albeit fragile, example. By combining South Korean capital and technology with North Korean labor, the KIC created a space of "controlled interaction" (Kim, 2010).

From the perspective of economic geography, Kaesong represented an attempt to create a "liminal economic space", a territory where the state of war was temporarily suspended in favor of economic rationality. Although the KIC was subject to political fluctuations, its legacy suggests that economic spatiality can be used as a de-escalation tool. However, the KIC followed a "brown economy" model (traditional manufacturing). This thesis argues that

¹⁹ Acronym of United Nations Industrial Development Organization.

²⁰ The Kaesong Industrial Complex operated between 2004 and 2016 as a joint economic project between North and South Korea investment with North Korean labor.

for such projects to be resilient in the 21st century, they must evolve into "Green SEZs" that prioritize ecological stability as much as economic output.

1.4.5 The DMZ as a hybrid space

The integration of economic geography and environmental peacebuilding allows for a reimagining of the Korean Demilitarized Zone. The DMZ can be conceptualized as a "Hybrid Space" where three layers overlap:

1. *The Mnemonic Layer*: A landscape of trauma and shared history (Halbwachs, 2001).
2. *The Ecological Layer*: An unintentional sanctuary of natural capital and biodiversity (Latour, 2004).
3. *The Economic Layer*: A potential Green SEZ where sustainable development acts as a peace-stabilizing force (*Ibidem*).

Within the theoretical framework outlined so far, the Korean Demilitarized Zone represents a particularly significant example of the complexity of contemporary borders. As the following chapters will demonstrate, the DMZ simultaneously embodies multiple dimensions of bordering, functioning as a space of division, interaction, diplomacy, memory, tourism, and environmental preservation. In this sense, it constitutes a particularly valuable case study through which to explore the multifaceted nature of borders in contemporary international relations.

Chapter 2

From colonial rule to division: the historical origins of the Korean Demilitarized Zone

The following chapter aims to introduce the concept of the demilitarized zone (DMZ) and, more specifically, to contextualize the Korean Demilitarized Zone within the broader historical and political development of the Korean Peninsula. Rather than focusing on the DMZ solely as a geographical or military boundary, the chapter presents it as a political instrument designed to manage unresolved and ongoing conflict.

The Korean DMZ is the representation of one of the most enduring and symbolically significant examples of such arrangements in modern international relations.

2.1 Demilitarized Zones in international politics

In international law and practice, a demilitarized zone (DMZ) refers to a territorial area established by agreement between opposing parties in which military forces, installations, and military activities are prohibited (Fleck, 2013).

Demilitarized zones are typically established in the aftermath of armed conflict, ceasefire agreements, or armistices, with the principal objective of preventing the renewal of hostilities rather than resolving the foundation of the conflict.

Unlike permanent borders established through peace treaties, DMZs often reflect a condition of political precariousness and uncertainty. They operate as mechanisms of conflict management, designed to reduce the risk of direct military confrontation or collisions while allowing opposing parties to coexist in a state of suspended hostility. Due to this reason, DMZs are frequently known as so-called “*frozen conflicts*,”²¹ in which violence has ceased, but political reconciliation remains elusive (*Ibidem*).

It can be stated that the political significance of demilitarized zones lies in their dual nature. Therefore, on one hand, they serve as fixing instruments that avoid conflictual escalation and provide a degree of predictability in hostile relationships, but on the other hand, they help in institutionalizing division and may contribute to the long-term perpetuation of conflict. This ambivalence is particularly clear in the case of the Korean Demilitarized Zone, which has now persisted for more than seven decades.

²¹ A “frozen conflict” is a situation in which active hostilities have ceased without a peace treaty or political settlement, leaving the dispute formally unresolved and liable to reignite.

Among the different demilitarized zones established during the twentieth century, the Korean DMZ stands out for its longevity, its high level of militarization along its borders, its complexity and its profound symbolic importance. To completely understand the origins and implications of the Korean DMZ, it is necessary to collocate its foundation within the broader historical and political context of the Korean Peninsula, in particular the division right after the end of Japanese colonial rule and the subsequent outbreak of the Korean War.

2.2 Japanese colonial rule and the origins of division (1910-1945)

Prior to its division in the aftermath of World War II, the Korean Peninsula had existed for centuries as a unified historical, cultural, and political entity. Despite periods of internal fragmentation and external pressure, Korea developed a strong sense of continuity rooted in a shared language, cultural traditions, and historical consciousness (Seth, 2019). This long-standing unity is essential for understanding the profound significance of the peninsula's later division and the emergence of the Korean Demilitarized Zone. Much of Korea's pre-modern history was characterized by centralized political authority, institutionalized and sustained through successive dynastic regimes, particularly during the Goryeo (918-1392) and Joseon dynasties (1392-1910). These periods contributed to the consolidation of political institutions, social hierarchies, and Confucian norms that shaped Korean society well into the twentieth century²².

While Korea's geopolitical position exposed it to influence and intervention from neighboring powers, particularly China and Japan, it nevertheless maintained a distinct political identity and cultural autonomy (*Ibidem*).

This historical continuity and homogeneity was fundamentally disrupted by the onset of Japanese colonial rule in 1910. The annexation of Korea by Japan marked a decisive break in Korean sovereignty and initiated a period of profound political, economic, and social transformation and division. Colonial policies aimed at integrating Korea into the Japanese empire undermined traditional institutions, exploited economic resources, and sought to suppress Korean cultural and national identity. At the same time, colonial rule contributed to the emergence of modern political movements and competing visions for Korea's future, including nationalist, socialist, and communist currents (Seth, 2019).

²² Korean Confucianism linked philosophical thought to concrete social and political practice, emphasising hierarchy and moral leadership. Its focus was on ethical action with implications for the individual, the family, and the state, rather than on individual spiritual life.

Indeed, Korea's modern historical trajectory was decisively shaped by the thirty-five years of Japanese colonial domination between 1910 and 1945. During this period, the colonial administration laid the foundations for numerous economic, educational, and governmental structures that continued to influence the peninsula long after liberation. At the same time, the regime's authoritarian control, extensive mobilization efforts, and policies of forced assimilation permeated nearly every aspect of Korean society, frequently producing experiences of repression, violence and psychological trauma. As Koreans navigated the constraints, pressures, and limited opportunities imposed by colonial rule, they articulated and consolidated ideological divisions that would later play a crucial role in shaping the political and social developments of the post-1945 era (*Ibidem*). Japanese colonial governance was characterized by a highly centralized and intrusive system of control imposed from above. The initial decade of Japanese colonial rule was especially severe, a phase commonly referred to by Koreans as the "dark period" (*amhŭkki*²³), and this era was marked by pervasive political repression that severely constrained not only political expression but also cultural and intellectual life. The Japanese colonial administration did not merely exploit the peninsula but fundamentally restructured its spatial economy in a way that prefigured the post-1945 division. As noted by Cumings (2010), the northern provinces were transformed into a heavy industrial base, rich in mineral resources and hydroelectric power, while the southern regions were designated as the primary agricultural granary. This "asymmetric development" meant that at the moment of liberation, neither half of the peninsula was economically self-sufficient. Indeed, the North possessed the means of production but lacked food security, while the South possessed the fertile plains but lacked the energy and industrial infrastructure to modernize (Seth, 2019, p. 235). Consequently, the subsequent establishment of the DMZ did not just sever a political entity, but a deeply integrated, albeit colonial, economic circuit.

2.2.1 Resistance, nationalism and ideological polarization

Against this backdrop of sustained repression, Korean opposition to Japanese rule gradually evolved, culminating in the first genuinely nationwide resistance movement in March 1919. Despite these setbacks, Korean individuals and groups sought to reclaim national sovereignty

²³ Korean term ('dark period') for the harsh first decade of colonial rule (1910–1919), under military government and severe repression.

through a variety of campaigns, most notably the *March First Independence Movement*²⁴. Although it did not result in immediate independence, the movement laid the foundations for the Korean Provisional Government in Shanghai, which proclaimed Korea a democratic republic based on the principle of popular sovereignty (Steering Committee for the Commemoration of the March First Independence Movement and 100th Anniversary of the Provisional Government, 2019).

Although originating from domestic grievances this mobilization was also shaped by international developments in the aftermath of the First World War. In particular, the postwar peace settlement and the global circulation of liberal ideas played a significant role, in particular, President Woodrow Wilson's articulation of the principle of "*National Self-Determination*" in his Fourteen Points²⁵ resonated strongly among Korean intellectuals and activists, providing an external ideological framework that helped legitimize anti-colonial aspirations and encouraged collective action against Japanese occupation (Treadwell, 2011).

During the 1920s, Korea experienced both a flourishing of cultural creativity and the crystallization of a core ideological divide within the nationalist movement. On one side were moderate, Western-oriented cultural nationalists who looked to the West as a model for modernization and civic behavior, while on the other were more radical figures who drew inspiration from anarchism, socialism, and, after 1917, communism, often turning to the Soviet Union for guidance. This internal polarization was reinforced by the colonial context: Japanese authorities maintained rigid distinctions between "peninsular" Koreans and "homeland" Japanese while themselves lacking a consistent vision of the relationship between colonizer and colonized. It was during this decade, that the divergent ideological trajectories that would later underpin the political foundations of the two Koreas, began to take shape (Daeyeol, 2025).

²⁴ The March First Independence Movement holds significance not only in Korea but also in world history as a pioneering non-violent protest. Before 1919, the world had seen no peaceful massive protest initiated by the oppressed under an anti-imperialist effort.

²⁵ The principle, articulated by U.S. President Woodrow Wilson in his 1918 "Fourteen Points," that peoples should determine their own political status; it strongly influenced anti-colonial movements after the First World War.

Figure 2. *Koreans hold mass protests against Japanese colonial rule in front of the traditional gate Gwanghwamun in Seoul.*



Source: The Independence Hall of Korea Government (2019) / <https://www.korean-culture.org/eng/webzine/201902/sub05.html>

2.3 Liberation, occupation and the emergence of two political systems

The liberation of Korea from Japanese rule in 1945, while a moment of triumph, was immediately accompanied by a profound national tragedy, the division of the country. Several developments in the final stages of World War II contributed to this outcome, most importantly the contingencies of the Allied powers as the war ended, the emerging rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union, and the fragmented nature of the Korean nationalist movements. Although Allied occupation had long been considered in postwar planning, the actual division of Korea ultimately reflected a combination of expediency and external geopolitical pressures. Taken together, these events, starting from colonial repression and resistance to cultural flourishing and ideological polarization, surely shaped the contours of modern Korean society and the enduring complexities of the Korean Peninsula and its division (Seth, 2019).

As explained, the end of Japanese rule in 1945 did not result in the immediate restoration of Korean independence as a unified state. Instead, the peninsula became the site of competing geopolitical interests in the early Cold War context. Following Japan's surrender, Korea was

temporarily divided along the 38th parallel, with Soviet forces occupying the northern part of the peninsula and U.S. forces administering the South. What was initially conceived as a provisional administrative arrangement soon evolved into a more entrenched political division. But due to the events of this period laid the structural foundations for the establishment of two separate Korean states in 1948, each aligned with opposing ideological and political systems. The division of the peninsula was thus not the product of long-standing internal separation, but rather the result of external intervention combined with unresolved domestic tensions. Understanding this historical background is crucial for interpreting the subsequent outbreak of the Korean War and the creation of the Korean Demilitarized Zone as a response to a conflict rooted in both local and global dynamics (Cumings, 2010).

2.3.1 Allied occupation and the emergence of two Korean states (1945-1948)

Following Japan's surrender in August 1945, Korea achieved long-awaited liberation, yet this moment of triumph was immediately overshadowed by profound uncertainty and division. With the rapid withdrawal of Japanese authorities, the peninsula became a site of strategic interest for the victorious Allied powers. In particular Soviet forces advanced into the northern regions, while American troops were still distant, prompting U.S. officials to hastily establish a line along the 38th parallel to delineate occupation zones, a decision made for military convenience rather than historical, cultural, or geographic considerations (Seth, 2019; Cumings, 2010). The selection of the 38th parallel stands as one of the most consequential examples of "cartographic contingency" in modern history.

On the night of August 10-11, 1945, American colonels Dean Rusk and Charles Bonesteel were tasked with defining occupation zones under extreme time pressure. Utilizing a map from *National Geographic*, they chose the 38th parallel primarily because it ensured that the capital, Seoul, would remain within the American zone, despite the line having no basis in Korean history or administrative tradition (Cumings, 2010). This decision transformed a convenient military abstraction into a rigid geopolitical reality. The 38th parallel was never intended to be a permanent border, yet it became the "*ghost line*" upon which the future DMZ would eventually be constructed. This temporary division, unexpectedly accepted by the Soviet Union, laid the groundwork for the emergence of two distinct political systems (Seth, 2019).

The 38th parallel had never represented a historical, cultural, or political boundary within the Korean Peninsula. For centuries, Korea had existed as a relatively unified political and

cultural entity, and the division established in 1945 was originally conceived as a temporary administrative measure aimed at facilitating the surrender of Japanese forces. Neither the United States nor the Soviet Union initially envisaged the creation of two separate Korean states. However, the growing tensions of the emerging Cold War gradually transformed this provisional line into a permanent geopolitical division, ultimately laying the foundations for the establishment of North and South Korea (*Ibidem*).

In the process, internally the Korean nationalist movement, already fragmented after decades of colonial rule, struggled to assert unified authority. The Korean Provisional Government²⁶, revived in exile in Chongqing, had limited influence and was largely ignored by the major Allied powers. Local people's committees spontaneously emerged across the peninsula, reflecting popular aspirations for immediate independence. Prominent figures such as Yŏ Un-hyŏng²⁷ attempted to organize transitional governance, advocating for the release of political prisoners and preparation for self-rule, but these efforts were constrained by the rapidly changing geopolitical landscape.

In the North, the Soviets collaborated with existing people's committees and incorporated returning Korean guerrillas from Manchuria and Siberia. Kim Il Sung²⁸ was promoted as a leader possessing both nationalist and Communist credentials. Initially, non-Communist figures such as Cho Man-sik were included to give the appearance of pluralism, but effective authority rapidly consolidated under the Communists. The North implemented radical reforms including land redistribution, nationalization of Japanese-owned industries, and the establishment of social organizations to mobilize workers, peasants, and women. By 1946–1947, the North Korean Workers' Party had merged various Communist factions, established local governance structures, and set the stage for the formal proclamation of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea in September 1948 (Cumings, 2010).

In the South, the U.S. occupation faced a fragmented nationalist movement and competing political groups. General John R. Hodge, appointed to oversee the U.S. Military Government in Korea, relied on conservative and moderate figures while suppressing leftist-oriented initiatives, including the Korean People's Republic. Economic hardship, inflation, refugee

²⁶ Government in exile organized in April 1919 in Shanghai by Korean patriots. The provisional government was formed in reaction to Japanese suppression of the March 1st Movement.

²⁷ One of the major activists and politicians with socialist ideals for independence in the early modern Korea.

²⁸ North Korean politician and dictator of the Democratic People's of Korea (DPRK) which he ruled as its first, supreme and only leader until his death in 1994.

influx, and social unrest further complicated administration. The United States encouraged the establishment of advisory councils and legislative bodies dominated by conservatives and supported the return of exiled leaders such as Syngman Rhee. Despite popular opposition to a proposed Allied trusteeship²⁹, political maneuvering and U.S. oversight gradually allowed for elections in the South. On August 15, 1948, the Republic of Korea was officially proclaimed, with Syngman Rhee as its first president (Seth, 2019; Cumings, 2010).³⁰

Thus, by the late 1940s, two distinct political systems had emerged on the Korean Peninsula, shaped by a combination of internal divisions, ideological polarization, and external intervention. The post-liberation enthusiasm for immediate independence was supplanted by the realities of occupation and geopolitical contestation, setting the stage for the permanent division of Korea and the subsequent conflict that would define its modern history.

²⁹A proposal, advanced at the December 1945 Moscow Conference, to place Korea under a multi-power international administration for up to five years before independence; it met widespread Korean opposition.

³⁰ A short-lived self-governing body proclaimed in Seoul in September 1945 in the vacuum following Japan's surrender; unrecognized by the U.S. Military Government and soon suppressed. Not to be confused with the later Democratic People's Republic of Korea.

Figure 3. *The border between the Two Koreas.*



Source:: LiveJournal (2022) / <https://gordonskene.livejournal.com/765718.html>

2.4 From division to war: rising tensions on the Peninsula (1948-1950)

By the late 1940s, the two Korean states had solidified their political systems, yet neither accepted the division of the peninsula as permanent. Frequent border clashes and growing tensions reflected both governments' desire for reunification, while the broader context of the emerging Cold War intensified the conflict. In the North, Kim Il Sung consolidated power with the support of the Soviet Union, implementing extensive reforms such as land redistribution, industrial nationalization, literacy programs, and the expansion of a disciplined military. In contrast, the South, under Syngman Rhee³¹ and U.S. oversight, faced severe economic and social challenges, including a shattered industrial base, unreliable infrastructure, inflation, refugee influx, and political unrest. Rhee's government relied on authoritarian measures, including arrests, martial law, and the suppression of leftist and opposition groups, to maintain control (Seth, 2019; Cumings, 2010).

³¹ First President of the Republic of Korea until 1960.

Following the establishment of the two Korean states in 1948, tensions quickly began to rise along the peninsula. Neither the Democratic People's Republic of Korea in the North nor the Republic of Korea in the South recognized the legitimacy of the other, and both governments claimed sovereignty over the entire territory. Early clashes and skirmishes along the 38th parallel reflected these competing claims and highlighted the fragility of the division (*Ibidem*)

The ideological polarization of the peninsula was reinforced by the broader Cold War context. The United States and the Soviet Union, while primarily concerned with their global strategic interests, encouraged the consolidation of their respective client regimes. In the North, the Soviet Union continued to support Kim Il Sung, providing military aid, training, and political guidance, while in the South, the United States backed Syngman Rhee, ensuring that the new government could maintain internal order and resist Communist influence. The interplay of these external powers further entrenched the division and reduced the possibility of reconciliation (Seth, 2019; Cumings, 2010).

Internally, both governments faced challenges to their authority. The North worked to eliminate potential rivals and strengthen the Korean Workers' Party as the central organizing force and in the South, Rhee's administration confronted leftist opposition, residual Japanese collaborators, and social unrest, relying on political repression and emergency measures to stabilize the state. Despite these efforts, the border remained a site of tension, and small-scale clashes became increasingly frequent throughout 1949 and early 1950. The cumulative effect of these political, ideological, and military pressures created a volatile environment in which the outbreak of full-scale war became increasingly likely. The actions and decisions of both domestic actors and external powers set the stage for the June 1950 invasion by North Korean forces, which would escalate into the Korean War. This period of tension, therefore, represents a crucial bridge between the initial post-liberation developments and the open conflict that followed, illustrating how the unresolved division of the peninsula, combined with Cold War dynamics, transformed a temporary administrative boundary into a permanent geopolitical fault line (*Ibidem*).

2.5 The Korean War (1950-1953) and the armistice

Following the escalation of tensions along the 38th parallel, the Korean War erupted on June 25, 1950, when North Korean forces launched a surprise offensive across the border. The North Korean army quickly overwhelmed the South Korean forces and captured Seoul,

demonstrating both the strength of the northern military and the fragility of the southern administration (Riotto,2018).

The United States, acting under the auspices of the United Nations, intervened to support South Korea. The Inchon landing³², orchestrated by General Douglas MacArthur, allowed UN and South Korean forces to regain lost territory and advance deep into the North, temporarily occupying Pyongyang. However, Chinese intervention in late 1950 reversed these gains, forcing UN and South Korean troops to retreat and stabilize the front along a line close to the original 38th parallel (Cumings, 2010).

The conflict caused massive casualties among both military personnel and civilians, widespread destruction of infrastructure, and large-scale displacement of populations. Both North and South Korea used the war to consolidate domestic authority, the North purged political rivals, mobilized the population through the Korean Workers' Party, and strengthened the military, while the South, under Syngman Rhee, implemented repressive measures, including arrests, martial law, and the suppression of political opposition (Riotto, 2018).

The war formally ended with the Armistice Agreement signed on July 27, 1953. Although the armistice halted active hostilities, it did not produce a formal peace treaty, leaving the peninsula divided along a line closely approximating the 38th parallel. The agreement entrenched the separate regimes of Kim Il Sung and Syngman Rhee, reshaped Korean society, and established the conditions for the creation of the Korean Demilitarized Zone. The DMZ would later serve not only as a militarized buffer but also as a symbol of frozen conflict, ideological division, and enduring geopolitical tension on the Korean Peninsula (Seth, 2019).

2.6 The creation of the Korean Demilitarized Zone

The Korean Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) emerged directly from the Korean War's protracted military stalemate and the complex negotiations that followed. Truce discussions began in July 1951 in Kaesong, eventually moving to Panmunjom, where the primary parties debated the terms of an armistice.

³² An amphibious assault led by General Douglas MacArthur in September 1950 behind North Korean lines, which reversed the early course of the war and enabled the recapture of Seoul.

Negotiations were prolonged, with repeated suspensions, largely due to disagreements over the repatriation of prisoners of war, the demarcation of military lines, and South Korea's reluctance to accept any arrangement that would formalize the peninsula's division (Cumings, 2010). Despite repeated obstacles, an armistice was finally signed on July 27, 1953, by the major belligerents, excluding the Republic of Korea, which refused to sign.

The armistice agreement established the Military Demarcation Line (MDL), running approximately along the 38th parallel, and a 2.5-mile-wide buffer zone³³ on either side, which came to be known as the DMZ. This strip was intended to separate the forces, prevent accidental clashes, and provide a neutral area monitored by the Neutral Nations Supervisory Commission³⁴. Although conceived as a temporary measure pending a formal peace treaty, the DMZ quickly became a permanent fixture, effectively institutionalizing the division of the Korean Peninsula (Seth, 2019; Riotto, 2018).

Technical precision is fundamental to understanding the DMZ's function. The Armistice Agreement established the Military Demarcation Line (MDL) as the actual border, with the DMZ extending exactly 2,000 meters north and south of this line. Within this 4-kilometer-wide strip, the Joint Security Area (JSA) at Panmunjom represents the only point where North and South Korean forces stand face-to-face. Known as the "*truce village*," the JSA is a microcosmic representation of the entire conflict: a space where the MDL is physically marked by a low concrete curb, and where diplomatic blue barracks straddle the line (Fleck, 2013). This area, intended for neutral negotiation, became a site of extreme tension, exemplified by the "*Bridge of No Return*,"³⁵ which remains a haunting symbol of the finality of the division.

The DMZ was not merely a military line but a highly political and symbolic space. It represented the frozen nature of the conflict, while open hostilities had ceased, the absence of a peace treaty meant that the Korean Peninsula remained technically at war. Both Koreas heavily militarized their respective sides of the DMZ, reflecting ongoing distrust and the unresolved ideological confrontation. The zone also became a tangible reminder of the war's immense human cost: millions of soldiers and civilians perished, cities in the North were

³³ A buffer zone is a region situated between two or more opposing powers, intended to maintain physical separation. It is therefore regarded as a mechanism for promoting peace and stability.

³⁴ The body was established by the 1953 Armistice Agreement to supervise its implementation, originally composed of delegates from Sweden and Switzerland (designated by the UN Command) and Poland and Czechoslovakia (designated by North Korea and China).

³⁵ A bridge crossing the Military Demarcation Line at Panmunjom, used for the exchange of prisoners of war after the armistice; captives were given a single, irreversible choice of which side to remain on, hence the name.

devastated by bombardments, and both states emerged profoundly shaped by the conflict (Cumings, 2010; Seth, 2019).

In addition to its military function, the DMZ became a structural mechanism through which both the North and South consolidated their regimes. In the South, the war and the presence of U.S. support enabled the Rhee government to strengthen its bureaucracy, expand military forces, and legitimize its authority under the ideology of anti-communism. In the North, Kim Il Sung consolidated political control, pursued militarization, and sought to maintain the aspiration for reunification, albeit under his own terms. The DMZ, therefore, not only separated the two Koreas geographically but also provided a framework for each regime to fortify its political, military, and economic order (Seth, 2019).

Finally, the DMZ's establishment had lasting regional and global implications. It solidified the Korean Peninsula as a frontline in the Cold War, drawing in major powers and shaping U.S. military and economic policy in East Asia. The armistice and the DMZ's enduring presence reinforced the U.S.-ROK alliance, structured postwar economic assistance, and contributed to the broader regional order that included Japan, Taiwan, and U.S. strategic bases. In this sense, the DMZ was both a local resolution to a military stalemate and a component of a wider geopolitical equilibrium (Riotto, 2018).

Taken together the Korean DMZ originated as a temporary military buffer born from the exigencies of armistice negotiations, yet it rapidly evolved into a permanent, highly militarized, and politically charged boundary. Its creation was the product of war, international negotiation, and the interplay of local and global forces, establishing a framework that continues to define the Korean Peninsula's security and political landscape to this day.

2.7 From military buffer zone to multidimensional border space

Nowadays, the Korean DMZ embodies a border space characterized by a complex interrelation of multiple dimensions, military, political, diplomatic, and, above all, symbolic. It is a space where history and memory converge, where the consequences of past wars remain visible, and where the possibility of reconciliation continues to coexist with ongoing tensions. As such, the DMZ is not only a boundary of separation, but also a profound marker of Korean identity, of the enduring challenges of peace on the peninsula (Seth, 2019), and a site of considerable importance for international relations.

The Korean DMZ is far more than a simple physical barrier. It is, first and foremost, a historical sediment of some of the most violent ideological and colonial ruptures of the twentieth century. At the same time, it remains one of the most significant geopolitical frontiers of the contemporary international system, shaping both regional dynamics and global perceptions of security and conflict (Riotto, 2018). Understanding its historical origins and symbolic significance is therefore essential for examining the multiple functions that this border has progressively acquired in the contemporary era. The following chapters will further explore and critically examine these dimensions, demonstrating how the DMZ has evolved into a multidimensional space whose relevance extends far beyond its original military purpose.

Chapter 3

The DMZ as a political and symbolic landscape

Building on the previous discussion of the DMZ as a space defined by historical conflict and ecological transformation, this section will examine its role as a site of controlled interaction between the Democratic People's Republic of Korea and the Republic of Korea.

The diplomatic relevance of the Korean Demilitarized Zone is deeply rooted in its unique historical legacy. Unlike other emblematic symbols of the Cold War, such as the Berlin Wall³⁶, which disappeared following German reunification, the DMZ remains one of the last material manifestations of the Cold War still existing and functioning in the contemporary international system (Choung, 2021). More than seventy years after the signing of the Korean Armistice Agreement, the Korean Peninsula remains technically at war, making the DMZ a unique geopolitical space where the legacies of ideological confrontation continue to shape contemporary security dynamics and international relations. As the only still-existing site of division inherited from the Cold War order, the DMZ occupies a singular position within global geopolitics, serving simultaneously as a military frontier, a symbol of unresolved conflict, and a platform for diplomatic engagement (*Ibidem*). Precisely because of this symbolic and political significance, the DMZ has increasingly become a privileged arena for inter-Korean dialogue, international negotiations, and peacebuilding initiatives.

Despite its origin as a highly controlled and militarized buffer zone, the DMZ has also functioned as a unique point of reconnection, where limited forms of inter-Korean encounters have taken place over time.

In fact, paradoxically, the Korean Demilitarized Zone, which still remains one of the most fortified borders in the modern world, is the only place where direct encounters between North and South Korea can occur. Far from being merely a line of separation, the border operates as a controlled interface, where interaction is not only possible, but carefully staged and politically significant.

At the same time as diplomatic and political meetings, the DMZ has hosted family reunions, thereby enhancing its symbolic power and the connection between the two Koreas, a connection that was supposed to end right at the border.

³⁶ A reinforced concrete barrier built by the German Democratic Republic (GDR) to separate East Berlin (controlled by the Soviet Union) from West Berlin. It divided the city physically and ideologically for 28 years, from August 13, 1961, to November 9, 1989, becoming a global symbol of the Cold War and the Iron Curtain.

3.1 Diplomacy from below: family reunions and human reconnection

Despite its function as a diplomatic and political scenario, the DMZ has been the stage of significant emotional events.

In fact, among the most significant and meaningful forms of inter-Korean encounters at the border are the family reunions that involve many relatives who have been brutally separated by war and division. After the end of the Japanese occupation³⁷ and the Korean War, people all over the country started moving about the peninsula for many and different reasons. However, since the 1953 Armistice Agreement³⁸ the DMZ came to function not only as a political border between North and South but also as a human barrier with the consequence of dividing thousands and thousands of families. Many separations became permanent right after the establishment of the Demilitarized Zone (Bagherzadeh, 2014).

As decades passed, the humanitarian emergency of family reunions increased, particularly due to the advanced age of many surviving applicants.

The very first official inter-Korean family reunions occurred in 1985, more than three decades after the War and the consequent creation of the DMZ, showing their conditioning by power dynamics and the state's decisions (*Ibidem*).

But, between 2000 and 2007 the situation started to improve significantly because, during this seven-year period, sixteen rounds of family reunions took place due to the first inter-Korean summit. In fact, in June of 2000, the President of South Korea, Kim Dae Jung, and the chairman of the National Defence Commission of North Korea, Kim Jong Il, agreed to meet in Pyongyang, realizing the very first personal conversation between “the two heads of the two Koreas” (East Asian Strategic Review, 2001). The reasons behind the summit were essentially political and economic reasons, such as the necessity to reinforce the cooperation between Japan, United States and South Korea, with the annexed necessity for North Korea to open up to the international community (*Ibidem*). Despite this, during the previous years after the summit, the relations between the two Koreas remained relatively stable and that kind of political situation created less restrictive conditions and many relatives had, for the first time, the opportunity to reconnect. The data shared reveal how nearly 3400 families met in the reunions that happened during 2000 and 2007 (Choe, 2009).

³⁷ From 1910 to 1945, South Korea was ruled by the Empire of Japan as a colony under the name Chōsen (朝鮮).

³⁸ The Korean Armistice Agreement brought the end of the Korean War. Signed on 27th July 1953, it established the Korean Demilitarized Zone that runs near to the 38th parallel separating North and South Korea since then.

The first round of reunions, as previously noted, was the result of the first ever meeting between the two Korean President and the result of the *Sunshine Policy*³⁹ initiated by South Korean President Kim Dae-Jung through which President Kim wanted to ease tension, to reach out the initiation of a period of economic, political, humanitarian cooperation and reconciliation (Fiori, 2010). During this period, led by the *Sunshine Policy*, Korea experienced a phase of *political détente*, where the meaning of the border, which established the presence of two divided countries, realities and people, was temporarily reshaped.

Since 2007 occasional reunions were recorded: one reunion took place in both 2009 and 2010, during difficult period for the two Koreas. 2010 was followed by an agreement, in the august of 2013, between President Park and Kim Jong-un through which they agreed to restart and improve family reunions but, some days before the beginning of the official family reunions the DPRK decided to withdraw the agreement. One more round took place in 2014 (Bagherzadeh, 2014). It is estimated that, between 2000 and 2010, about 17.000 Koreans had the opportunity to reconnect with their relatives while more than 3700 virtually met due to video calls (Kim, 2010)

South Korean President Park was determined and enthusiastic about making the family reunions project to be true and effective, stressing out on the necessity, as a concrete solution, to construct an “international peace park” within the DMZ to facilitate regular family reconnections (Keck, 2013).

In this sense, it is clear how family reunions increasingly became embedded within broader political dynamics rather than being considered just as a concrete humanitarian emergency, testifying how even humanitarian and personal issues were easily incorporated into diplomatic and political strategies.

The tragedy of these reunions is compounded by their temporal dimension. Due to the fact that the division dates back in the 1950s, the number of surviving family members started to steadily decrease over time.

So, as a result, many individuals faced the reality of dying before ever reconnecting with their relatives again.

³⁹ Initiated by Kim Dae-jung, it guided inter-Korean relations from 1997 to 2008. It is a model of constructive engagement, based on economic, political, and humanitarian cooperation. The approach drew inspiration from Aesop's fable *The Sun and the Wind*, which teaches that the warmth of the Sun is more persuasive than the brute force of the wind in trying to convince a traveler to remove his cloak.

In this context, the DMZ is not merely a space of division, distance and absence, but also a space marked by loss, grief and unresolved memory.

Therefore, family reunions illustrate the dualistic nature of the DMZ: it simultaneously operates as a barrier and a site of reunification and reconnection, becoming an influential symbol of diplomacy, where politics interconnect with human emotion.

Figure 4. North Korean Son Kwon Geun, from center, weeps with his South Korean relatives as he bid farewell after the Separated Family Reunion Meeting at Diamond Mountain resort in North Korea.



Source: NBC NEWS (2015)
[/https://media-cldnry.s-nbcnews.com/image/upload/newscms/2018_24/2461911/180611-korea-separated-families-reunion-2015-ac-954p.jpg](https://media-cldnry.s-nbcnews.com/image/upload/newscms/2018_24/2461911/180611-korea-separated-families-reunion-2015-ac-954p.jpg)

Figure 5. Lee Keum-seom, 92, travelled to meet her North Korean son Lee Sung-chul, who she hadn't seen since he was four.



Source: BBC (2018)/ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-45243108>

3.2 Diplomacy from above: the inter-Korean summits

As this thesis has consistently argued, the DMZ is more than a simple buffer zone, it should be rather considered as a dynamic political scenario in which the two Koreas negotiate their relationship.

Over the years, the DMZ has been governed by silence and tension, however its role has gradually expanded into a location that has hosted important and significant high-level diplomatic events.

Retracing the relationship between the two Koreas, the history of inter-Korean summits has been marked by both long periods of tension and distance, occasionally interrupted by short glimmers of dialogue and hope.

The first two summits that involved the leaders of the two Koreas, took place in 2000 and 2007, both in Pyongyang, the capital city of DPRK⁴⁰.

These summits appeared to be the beginning of a significant change of the atmosphere of the impenetrable border, considering the total silence that governed the area since that moment.

From the first summit the efforts of the two leaders Kim Dae-Jung and Kim Jong il, gave rise to the project of the creation of two joint economic zones on the Northern side, the so called *Kaesong Industrial Complex* (KIC) and the *Mount Kumgang Tourist Region*, a special administrative region open for foreign tourists, including those who were from South Korea⁴¹. Furthermore, the first summit ended up with the adoption of the *North-South Joint Declaration* of June 15, which was extremely significant considering that it represents the first official attempt of collaboration for the reunification of the two Koreas.

The aim was to forget all the disagreements and make cooperation and reconciliation institutionalized (Park, 2020).

From the second summit, that took place six years later still in Pyongyang, the result was the signing of the *Declaration on the Advancement of the South-North Koreans Relations, Peace and Prosperity* of the 4th of October, in which both the leaders expressed the enthusiasm in moving beyond the armistice border to finally establish a permanent system of peace (Fiori, 2010).

As a consequence of these agreements, the following analysis focuses on the changing role of the DMZ: the initiatives, involved locations in both North Korean and South Korea, making

⁴⁰ Acronym of *Democratic People's Republic of Korea*

⁴¹ <https://www.ncnk.org/resources/briefing-papers/all-briefing-papers/special-economic-zones-dprk>

the DMZ appear more and more unnecessary. This opened up to a scenario of unification and cooperation, where the DMZ would not have been seen anymore as a dividing line space. Instead, the border would have become the corridor of economic and cultural exchange and space of union.

However, both the initiatives ended in 2008 and 2011, interrupting any attempts of collaboration, while remarking the existence of the separated countries.

While they surely marked a significant and crucial attempt of economic and political cooperation, they did not transform the DMZ into the space of direct interaction.

3.2.1 The crisis of 2017 and the road to Panmunjom

Despite the regression toward renewed hostilities and new tensions, the DMZ was not destined to remain a site of sciatica stalemate. Instead, it would become the stage for a significant and surprising diplomatic event: the historic third inter-Korean summit, held on April 27, 2018.

However, to fully understand the significance of this change it is necessary to take a step back and to examine the preceding climate of crisis between the two Koreas.

The period preceding the historic meeting of April 27 was characterized by a climate of extreme military, diplomatic and political tension, driven by a series of events that involved various international actors. Indeed, 2017 has been defined as a year of acute crisis between the two Koreas. that led to what appeared to be a definitive breaking point (Seth, 2023).

First and foremost, 2017 was the year in which North Korean leader Kim Jong-un consolidated his power through a series of missile and nuclear tests. In particular, Pyongyang demonstrated to the world its capability to launch Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles (ICBMs), potentially able to reach the coasts of the United States. Most significantly, North Korea tested what Kim Jong-un defined as a hydrogen bomb, a major evolution of the standard atomic bomb, which caused a magnitude 6.3 earthquake (*Ibidem*).

As a consequence, on the international stage, Kim Jong-un and U.S President Donald J. Trump began exchanging a series of threats and increasingly tense rhetoric, including

references to the potential use of nuclear weapons and real threats of war. The situation was further aggravated by immediately followed by North Korea's sixth nuclear test⁴².

2017 was deeply a fragile year and the consequences appeared extremely dangerous for the rest of the world, given the involvement of major military powers. It was a time when "the world had come closer to a nuclear war than at any time since the Cuban missile crisis" (Jackson, 2018).

3.3 The 2018 Panmunjom summit and the redefinition of the border

Despite the climate of extreme tension which, fortunately did not lead to an actual war or physical attacks, the situation started to take a different turn, primarily due to the role of sports diplomacy⁴³.

The XXIII Olympic Winter Games were hosted in PyeongChang, in South Korea and they can be considered the pivotal event that allowed for the easing of the immense tensions between the two Koreas.

Already a month before the beginning of the event, which took place from February 9 to 25, 2018, Kim Jong-un showed a willingness to reach out to South Korea during his traditional New Year's Address (*Shinnyeonsa*). He in fact proposed initiating official talks to discuss the possibility to the North Korean participation in the upcoming Olympics, describing it as a "good occasion for demonstrating the prestige of the Korean nation"⁴⁴ (Kim, 2018).

"[...] As for the Winter Olympic Games to be held soon in south Korea, it will serve as a good occasion for demonstrating our nation's prestige and we earnestly wish the Olympic Games a success. From this point of view we are willing to dispatch our delegation and adopt other necessary measures; with regard to this matter, the authorities of the north and the south may meet together soon. Since we are compatriots of the same blood as south Koreans, it is natural for us to share their pleasure over the auspicious event and help them.

⁴² Since 2006 the Democratic People's Republic of Korea has conducted six nuclear tests at the Punggye-ri underground site (풍계리 핵 실험장): October 9, 2006; May 25, 2009; February 12, 2013; January 6, 2016; September 9, 2016; September 3, 2017.

⁴³ The use of sporting events and exchanges as an instrument of foreign policy, to ease tensions and open channels of communication between states.

⁴⁴ In the official English transcription provided by the DPRK, South Korea is always written with a lowercase "s". This is a clear linguistic choice that reflects North Korea's ideological stance of not fully recognizing the sovereign legitimacy of the South Korean State.

*We will, in the future, too, resolve all issues by the efforts of our nation itself under the unfurled banner of national independence and frustrate the schemes by anti-reunification forces within and without on the strength of national unity, thereby opening up a new history of national reunification [...]*⁴⁵”

The outcome was of paramount importance. South Korea, led by President Moon Jae-in who had been in office since May 10, 2017, welcomed the North Korean leader's words with enthusiasm and great openness. Consequently, during the opening ceremony of the Olympic Games, North and South Korea marched together under a single, common flag as a powerful gesture of rapprochement between the two countries. Hand in hand, the athletes proudly paraded under the Korean Unification Flag, which shows the entire undivided peninsula in blue on a white background. Furthermore, a unified women's ice hockey team was formed, composed of both South and North Korean athletes, marking a historic moment of practical cooperation⁴⁶.

The rapprochement that took place during the Winter Games was the first stepping stone toward an historic encounter a few months later, which would mark the beginning of a new era. On the 27th of April, the third-Korean summit was held with the aim of achieving a permanent peace situation and the total denuclearization of North Korea.

Unlike the two previous summits of 2000 and 2007 the extraordinariness of this meeting was the location. In fact, for the first time, an inter-Korean summit took place on South Korean soil, in particular in the village of Panmunjom, situated within the Demilitarized Zone. This was the same location where, 65 years earlier in 1953, the Korean War Armistice had been signed.

⁴⁵ Kim Jong-un (2018, January 1). *New Year's Address*. National Committee on North Korea. <https://www.ncnk.org/node/1427>.

⁴⁶ Z. Aleem, "North and South Korea will march under one flag in the Olympic opening ceremony", *Vox*, 17 gennaio 2018, <https://www.vox.com/world/2018/1/17/16900972/winter-olympics-opening-ceremony-north-south-korea-flag>.

Figure 6. *The Joint Korean Delegation at the PyeongChang 2018 Opening Ceremony.*



Source: La Repubblica (2018) / https://www.repubblica.it/esteri/2018/02/09/news/le_coree_divise_dalla_storia_cosa_c_e_da_sapere-300951198/

3.3.1 Panmunjom Village and the Joint Security Area

It is important to clarify that the site of this historic meeting is known by two names that refer to the same location, Panmunjom, the name of the abandoned village where the 1953 armistice was signed, and the Joint Security Area (JSA), which is the official military designation for the specific portion of the DMZ where North and South Korean forces stand face-to-face every day.

The Joint Security Area is often described as the "most tense place on Earth" (Clinton, 1993)⁴⁷ and it serves as the primary venue for diplomatic negotiations, usually mediated by representatives of the United Nations Command (UNC)⁴⁸, which enforces the terms of the Armistice Agreement. This supervision is the reflection of the original alignment of the previous conflict, in fact, the Northern part represents North Korea and China, while the South is led by the UNC, so headed by the United States of America.

⁴⁷ B. Clinton, "Remarks to the 2nd Infantry Division at Camp Casey, South Korea", *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States*, 11 luglio 1993.

⁴⁸ "UNC enforces the terms of the Armistice Agreement, coordinates Sending State contributions, and executes assigned functions in the region as directed by U.S National Authorities through the Joint Chiefs of Staff, in order to restore peace and security on the Korean Peninsula". Source: United Nations Command <https://www.unc.mil/>

The architecture of the site embodies the visual representation of the “frozen conflict”, where political tension is inscribed directly into the topography. The JSA is made by a bright UN⁴⁹-blue buildings, which, in accordance with the terms of the Armistice, were established to house the Neutral Nations Supervisory Commission (NNSC) and the Military Armistice Commission (MAC)⁵⁰. These buildings are divided in two halves by the Military Demarcation Line (MDL) (The Guardian, 2023).

However the interior of these conference buildings is an unique spatial anomaly, due to the fact that they are the only areas where the border is effectively dematerialized and deterritorialized, letting people to technically stand in both North and South Korea at the same time (Winstanley-Chesters, 2019).

Beyond these functional buildings, Panmunjom is truly a landscape saturated with historical trauma and symbolic weight, where structures such as the "Bridge of No Return" exemplify the "division system" (Paik, 2011), marking the site where prisoners of war were historically repatriated. These landmarks serve as permanent reminders of the irreversible choices made during the conflict, anchoring the "site of memory" (Nora, 1989) in a specific, lived materiality.

The JSA could be understood as a "theater of division”, where the military forces of the two Koreas are forced to observe each other every day. Soldiers of both sides respect their assigned positions in a place where the communication is minimal or highly restricted.

In this "theater of division," soldiers from both sides maintain a rigid and motionless posture. Traditionally, the South Korean guards wear dark sunglasses and stand in a modified Taekwondo stance to project an image of unwavering strength, while North Korean soldiers watch from the steps of the *Panmungak* building (BBC, 2018). Every movement is monitored by cameras and binoculars, creating an environment designed for psychological intimidation.

The separation between the two nations is reduced to a mere concrete slab on the ground.

The Joint Security Area thus became the chosen place where the third, and most significant, summit between the two Koreas took place.

⁴⁹ Acronym of United Nations.

⁵⁰ Joint body created by the 1953 Armistice Agreement, composed of representatives of both sides (the UN Command and the Korean People's Army/Chinese People's Volunteers), responsible for supervising the implementation of the armistice and handling violations.

Figure 7. *The Joint Security Area (Panmunjom), where the Military Demarcation Line (MDL) separates North and South Korea.*



Source: Korean Culture ORG (2018) / <https://www.korean-culture.org/eng/webzine/201806/sub12.html>

Figure 8. *Interior of Conference Room T2, located within the Joint Security Area (JSA) inside the Korean Demilitarized Zone (DMZ).*



Source: Get your guide (2026) / <https://www.getyourguide.com/it-it/paju-si-1166877/seul-tour-del-museo-della-dmz-e-della-jsa-con-opzione-pon-te-sospeso-t1226390/>

Figure 9. *The Demarcation Line.* View from inside one of the UN buildings. The grey gravel is the South Korean side. The block in the middle is all that separates the two sides.



Source: The anthroporatorian (2026) / <https://theanthroporatorian.com/history/visiting-the-korean-demilitarized-zone>

Figure 10. *Soldiers from North and South Korea facing each other.* North Korean soldiers (C) take photos of a South Korean soldier (L) and a US soldier (R) standing before the military demarcation line.



Source: The Guardian (2023) / <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jul/19/what-is-the-joint-security-area-north-korea-south-korea>

3.3.2 Rituals of reconciliation beyond the concrete line

What happened on the 27th of April of 2018 is a real historical turning point that captured worldwide attention, indeed the meeting between the two leaders was the first after eleven years of total silence and political distance.

The summit was characterized by a series of exceptionally symbolic passages, intentionally designed to break down the hostilities that had been fixed to that border for years.

In this context, by the analysis of some specific moments that happened during the encounter between the two leaders, it is possible to observe how the DMZ and its various physical components became the very heart of the meeting, the symbolic protagonist of the whole event.

In fact, from that moment forward the border acquired an enormous symbolic and diplomatic weight, keeping the memory of an historical event that has inevitably marked both the history of the Korean Peninsula and the entire international community.

To understand the transformation that occurred through the summit it is necessary to look at the rituals that the two leaders performed to reach the reconciliation. Everything that the two leaders made in act on the 27th of April were symbolic actions that deconstruct the image and the role of the DMZ as a border and container of hostilities.

- *The first handshake and the double border crossing*

First of all, the historic meeting took place in the southern side of the peninsula. The North Korean leader agreed to hold the summit in the southern part of Panmunjom partly in response to an observation previously made by former South Korean President Kim Dae-jung during the first inter-Korean summit in June 2000. At the time, Kim Dae-jung, who was seventeen years older than Kim Jong-il, remarked that, according to Korean traditions of respect linked to age and hierarchy, it would have been appropriate for the younger leader to visit the elder one. Furthermore, hosting the meeting on the southern side of the border was also interpreted as a reciprocal gesture, considering that the two previous summits had both taken place on North Korean territory (BBC, 2018).

Certainly, the most iconic moment of the summit occurred when Kim Jong-un physically crossed the Military Demarcation Line.

On the morning of April 27, as documented by the countless photographs and videos capturing the encounter, South Korean President Moon Jae-in waited for President Kim, standing in front of the small concrete slab dividing the peninsula.

The two leaders slowly approached each other and, without hesitation, the North Korean leader stepped across the border into the South Korean side of the DMZ.

Standing before the attentive eyes of the international press, the two leaders held hands and spoke, smiling and enjoying the moment.

What happened next was another significant step for the peninsula, because before leaving the demarcation line, Kim Jong-un invited Moon Jae-in to cross the border as well, and the South Korean president, accepting the invitation, briefly stepped onto North Korean territory, while Kim reacted with visible satisfaction (CNA, 2018).

In that moment, the gesture of crossing the border, that is essentially represented by nothing more than a simple line of concrete bricks, appeared to be the symbolic overcoming of hostilities that had officially persisted since 1953. In that moment, the DMZ was transformed into the symbolic frame containing the power of a historic and memorable encounter. The demilitarized zone was no longer a space of tension and distance, but temporarily it was transformed into a site of proximity and reciprocal recognition.

Significantly, this transition was captured by Kim Jong-un himself, who joked remarking, during the meeting, that it had taken him sixty-five years to cross the few centimeters separating North and South Korea (Cho et al., 2018)

Figure 11. *North Korea's leader Kim Jong Un shakes hands with South Korea's President Moon Jae-in at the Military Demarcation Line that divides their countries.*



Source: Time (2018) / <https://time.com/5257062/north-korea-south-dmz-kim-jong-un-summit/>

Figure 12. North Korean leader Kim Jong Un and South Korean President Moon Jae-in cross the military demarcation line to the south side.



Source: Time (2018) 7 <https://time.com/5257125/kim-jong-un-moon-jae-in-meeting-transcript/>

Figure 13. North Korean leader Kim Jong Un and South Korean President Moon Jae-in cross the military demarcation line to the north side.



Source: The Guardian (2018) <https://www.theguardian.com/world/gallery/2018/apr/27/north-south-leaders-meet-korea-summit-pictures>

- ***The commemorative tree planting***

Following the initial dialogues at the Peace House on April 27, 2018, the encounter between Kim Jong Un and Moon Jae-in proceeded with a gesture of profound symbolic weight, the joint planting of a tree within the Joint Security Area (JSA). Far from being a mere formality, this act is embedded in a well-established political and cultural-geographic tradition of the Korean Peninsula, where sovereign authority is often manifested through the strategic manipulation of the landscape (Fiddler, 2018). As highlighted in academic literature, the practice of tree planting by institutional figures in Korea boasts a long-term historical trajectory, intrinsically linked to the processes of national state-building (Winstanley-Chesters, 2014).

The roots of this practice can be found back to the colonial period, influenced by Japanese modernization following the Meiji Restoration. Japan, drawing inspiration from United States forestry management models, such as the "Arbor Day"⁵¹(Kuga, 1972), institutionalized tree planting by linking it to the imperial cult (Totman, 1989). After the annexation of Korea in 1910, this holiday was exported to the territory of *Chosen*⁵² to legitimize the Empire's developmental capabilities and to consolidate bureaucratic ties between the two nations through the ritual calendar of the Government-General.

In the post-war era, despite decolonization and the trauma of the conflict (1945–1953), the link between political leadership and arboriculture remained intact on both sides of the 38th parallel. In particular:

- ***In South Korea***, President Syngman Rhee promoted the practice during his American exile⁵³, leading to the establishment of *Sikmogil* (Arbor Day) in 1949. The choice of April 5th was highly symbolic, aimed at commemorating the historical unification of the Three Kingdoms under the Silla Dynasty in 668 AD (Teplyakov, 2015). Subsequently, Park Chung-hee⁵⁴ utilized reforestation campaigns within the *Saemaul*

⁵¹ Arbor Day was officially established in 1874 by Nebraska's Governor, Robert W. Furnas, to encourage the planting of trees on the sparsely forested Great Plains. In 1885, Arbor Day was named a legal state holiday in Nebraska, and April 22 was selected as the date for its permanent annual observance.

⁵²Korea was annexed by the Japanese Empire and officially renamed *Chōsen* (朝鮮), becoming administratively governed by the *Government-General of Korea* (*Gōtoku Chōsen Sōtoku-fu*).

⁵³ South Korea's first president (1948–1960), went into exile in Honolulu, Hawaii, in May 1960 following the student-led April Revolution that protested rigged elections and his authoritarian rule.

⁵⁴ General who took power in a 1961 coup and ruled South Korea as president from 1963 until his assassination in 1979; associated with rapid state-directed industrialization and authoritarian rule.

*Undong movement*⁵⁵ to reconfigure the country's rural identity, connecting the image of the presidential family to the rejuvenation of the national forest heritage (Winstanley-Chesters, 2015).

- ***In North Korea***, the National Tree Planting Day has been framed according to the hagiography of the Kim dynasty. Initially associated with Kim Il Sung's 1946 ascent of Musan Hill in Pyongyang to plant trees, the occasion was later refocused to exalt the role of Kim Jong Il (Winstanley-Chesters, 2019). For the Pyongyang regime, the image of the Leader with a spade in hand remains a pillar of political communication, symbolizing revolutionary care and control over the national territory.

So consequently, the event of April 27th does not represent a diplomatic anomaly but rather a further "spatialization" of power (*Ibidem*). The chosen tree, a pine originally planted in 1953, functions as a living archive, because its biological age records the exact moment of the armed rupture between the two Koreas, acting as a witness to the "division system" (Paik, 2011). Simultaneously, through the joint action of Presidents Moon and Kim, the tree undergoes a "reterritorialization" (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987), transforming from a monument of separation into a "charismatic landscape" (Kwon and Chung, 2012) destined to commemorate a future of potential inter-Korean reconciliation.

- ***Combining national elements: soil and water***

The ritual of tree planting reached its symbolic zenith through the deliberate manipulation of natural elements sourced from the geographical extremities of the peninsula, a gesture embodying the process of "de-territorialization and re-territorialization" (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987). During the ceremony, Kim Jong Un applied soil from Mount Paektu/Baekdu, while Moon Jae-in utilized earth from Mount Halla (CNN, 2018). This act allowed the leaders to "acquire" and transport opposing topographies into the heart of the JSA, materializing a sense of territorial continuity in a space otherwise defined by political rupture. While the effort to re-specialize a mountainous topography in a landscape so distant from any highland may seem unusual, Mount Paektu possesses an omnipresent quality in Korean culture, indeed it inhabits the public spaces of both nations, appearing in North Korean murals as well as in installations within the Seoul subway system (Winstanley-Chesters et al., 2019).

⁵⁵ Literally "New Community Movement," a state-led rural modernization campaign launched in South Korea in 1970 under Park Chung-hee to improve rural living standards and infrastructure.

The significance of this "re-spatialization" lies in the sacredness of the mountain as a vital topographic element for the peninsula's historiography and mythology. Mount Paektu represents a unifying territory that transcends current borders, according to tradition, the vital energies of *ki* (氣) flow through this peak to spread along the Korean mountain ranges, concentrating at specific points inhabited by mountain spirits or *sanshin* (Mason, 1999). For North Korea, this site also provides a "topographic charisma" (Kwon and Chung, 2012) that is essential for the political legitimacy of the Kim dynasty.

In addition to the telluric component, this symbolic unification was completed by the element of water. Kim Jong Un utilized water from the Taedong River, which flows through Pyongyang, while Moon Jae-in watered the roots with resources from the Han River, the symbolic heart of Seoul (CNN, 2018). By merging the waters of the two capitals, the leaders engaged in a further spatializing effort aimed at generating a "ground of unification" within the "division system" (Paik, 2011). These gestures allowed for the temporary de-territorialization of a peninsula torn by contemporary conflict, projecting a re-territorialized Korea into a potential future of unity (Winstanley-Chesters, 2019). Through the fusion of earth and water, the JSA was transformed from a zone of confrontation into a laboratory for national "re-materialization."

- *Another symbol inside the Peace House*

The symbolic construction of the summit landscape extended beyond natural elements to include the strategic use of visual arts within the Peace House. Throughout the official proceedings, Moon Jae-in and Kim Jong Un were frequently photographed in front of paintings depicting Korea's most iconic peaks, most notably Mount Keumgang (the Diamond Mountain).

Within the hierarchy of Korean topography and mythology, Keumgang occupies a position of prominence that is second only to Mount Paektu, which is regarded as the spiritual and ancestral heart of the entire peninsula. While Keumgang is celebrated for its aesthetic beauty and modern touristic cooperation, Mount Paektu is revered as the mythological birthplace of Dangun⁵⁶, the legendary founder of the first Korean kingdom (Gojoseon), thus representing the common "root" of the Korean people that predates modern political division (Winstanley-Chesters and Ten, 2016). As a potent cultural signal of unity, this topographic

⁵⁶ The use of sporting events and exchanges as an instrument of foreign policy, to ease tensions and open channels of communication between states.

hierarchy underscores that the shared ethnic and historical identity embodied by Paektu serves as the essential framework for any act of reconciliation (Winstanley-Chesters, 2019).

Furthermore, the invocation of Mount Keumgang carries significant weight regarding modern inter-Korean connectivity. Following the 1998 development of the Keumgangsan Tourist Area, a joint venture between South Korea's Hyundai Asan and North Korean authorities, the mountain became a primary laboratory for inter-Korean cooperation (Paik, 2011). Although visits were suspended in 2008, the site had previously facilitated reunions for over a million South Korean visitors and numerous divided families, generating substantial social and symbolic capital for both nations (Paik, 2011). By visually integrating these topographies into the diplomatic corridors of the JSA, the Peace House was effectively transformed into an extension of the peninsula's "topographic charisma," where the artistic environment actively reinforced the broader diplomatic performance (Winstanley-Chesters, 2019).

In final analysis, the moments of convergence observed during the summit were possible not only by the evident personal rapport between the two leaders but, more significantly, by the capacity of "spatialization" to act as an active container for reconciliation. The DMZ, and Panmunjom specifically, must not be understood as a geographical vacuum, but rather as a landscape saturated with symbolism, capable of transforming into an "intermediate space" where a future Korea is evoked through political performances that draw upon historical energies and distant topographies.

This dynamic finds a rigorous explanation within the framework of geophilosophy, as conceptualized by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. To fully grasp this perspective, it is essential to clarify the dialectic between deterritorialization and reterritorialization. Deterritorialization refers to a process of "liberation" where an element, be it an object, a ritual, or a space, is uprooted from its habitual context and predefined functions and in the case of the DMZ, this occurs when the border is "emptied" of its military connotations. While reterritorialization is the subsequent phase, in which these displaced elements are reorganized into a new system of meanings, establishing a nascent symbolic territory ((Deleuze and Guattari 1987).

Through the lenses of deterritorialization and reterritorialization, the DMZ reveals itself as a perfect stage, while the former represents the rupture of established ties, habits, and structures effectively overcoming the rigid boundaries of the present, the latter constitutes the process of reorganizing these elements upon entirely new foundations. During the summit, real

topographic and ecological elements were "liberated" from their conventional connections with the politics of conflict to be reterritorialized within a suspended time and space (Winstanley-Chesters, 2019).

In this sense, the manipulation of elements such as the soil from Mount Paektu or the water from the Han River allowed for the detachment of Korean culture and history from a complex and fragmented present, projecting them into a suspended vision of a future reunified Korea where the "division system" (Paik, 2011) appears momentarily resolved. The act of planting the tree and other gestures of symbolic connection thus function as "lines of flight", as the vectors that traverse the physical reality of the peninsula to trace a path beyond the contemporary moment. Within this framework, Panmunjom ceases to be a monument to separation and instead becomes a laboratory for spatial imagination, where geomantic heritage and geophilosophical processes merge to give form to a Korea that does not yet exist, but has already been materially experienced (Winstanley-Chesters, 2019).

3.4 The consolidation of the 2018 diplomatic process

The summit held on the 27th of April between President Moon Jae-in and the North Korean Chairman Kim Jong-un ended with the adoption of a declaration: the *Panmunjom Declaration for Peace, Prosperity and Unification of the Korean Peninsula*.

The agreement came out after a long and private dialogue between the two leaders, giving to the summit concrete and real substance. The agreement contained three articles and thirteen paragraphs (Sung, 2018).

The goals established in the Declaration respected three principal priorities. First of all the Declaration points out the will of both the leaders to improve inter-Koreans relations, while also underlining the necessity of starting a process of denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.

The second priority was mainly focused on the mutual goal to establish a permanent peace regime on the entire peninsula through the establishment of a formal and official Peace Treaty, reiterating the principal necessity of a complete abandonment of Pyongyang's nuclear program (Ibidem).

Finally, the two Koreas stressed the irreversible nature of the new inter-Korean relations and the need to implement agreements and official joint declarations (Watanabe, 2018). The Panmunjom Declaration⁵⁷ also included commitments needed for reducing military tensions

⁵⁷ Panmunjom Declaration is the common abbreviation for *Panmunjom Declaration for Peace, Prosperity and Unification of the Korean Peninsula*

along the DMZ and the suspension of the nuclear activities near the Military Demarcation Line implemented by Pyongyang (*Ibidem*).

Although the situation between the two Koreas is precarious at the moment, the Panmunjom Declaration and the priorities that were established with that declaration represent one of the most important and significant attempts to meet the need to redefine the role of the DMZ and the border in general in contemporary inter-Koreans relations (Sung, 2018).

3.4.1 The other summits

The diplomatic process started in April 2018 did not end with the Panmunjom Declaration. On the 26th of May indeed, Moon Jae-in and Kim Jong-un held a second unexpected summit within the Joint Security Area, this time on the North Korean side of Panmunjom. Unlike the previous meeting of April, the summit was organized without any prior public announcement and emerged in response to growing uncertainty surrounding the planned meeting between Kim Jong-un and United States President Donald Trump (Cho et al., 2018).

The meeting took place shortly after President Trump had unexpectedly suspended the planned Singapore summit⁵⁸, the very first proposed meeting between a sitting U.S. president and a North Korean leader, generating concerns regarding the stability of the broader diplomatic process. In this context, Moon Jae-in assumed a significant mediating role between Washington and Pyongyang, attempting to preserve the continuity of dialogue and facilitate future negotiations between the United States and North Korea (*Ibidem*).

During their meeting, the two Korean leaders reconfirmed their commitment to implement the goals established in the Panmunjom Declaration, in particular those related to peace-keeping and the reduction of military tensions on the whole peninsula. Although the summit lasted only a few hours, it further reinforced the diplomatic centrality of Panmunjom and the DMZ within both inter-Korean and international negotiations.

The second 2018 summit therefore showed once again how the DMZ was progressively transforming from a static military border into a flexible diplomatic interface. It is in fact a container capable of hosting, not only bilateral encounters, but also negotiations connected to broader global geopolitical dynamics.

The third inter-Korean summit of 2018, was held in Pyongyang in September and it further reinforced the diplomatic process initiated some previous months at Panmunjom. Beyond the

⁵⁸ The first meeting between a sitting U.S. president and a North Korean leader, held in Singapore on 12 June 2018 between Donald Trump and Kim Jong-un.

symbolic dimension of the meetings, the summit also produced concrete military agreements aimed at reducing tensions along the border.

One of the most significant results of the summit was the adoption of a series of military confidence-building measures along the DMZ and the Military Demarcation Line (MDL).

In particular the two Koreas agreed to establish buffer zones on land, sea and air in order to reduce the possibility of military escalation and accidental confrontation (Panda, 2018).

Particularly significant was the decision to partially disarm the Joint Security Area and remove several guard posts along the DMZ, temporarily transforming one of the most militarized spaces in the world into a less confrontational environment (Panda, 2018).

These measures symbolically challenged the traditional perception of the DMZ as an exclusively hostile frontier and reinforced the new idea of the border as a potential space for coexistence and diplomatic interaction.

The agreement also included joint projects aimed at removing landmines and recovering the remains of Korean War soldiers within the DMZ. In this sense, the border landscape increasingly became associated not only with military division, but also with reconciliation and the possibility of future cooperation (*Ibidem*).

3.4.2 The arrival of Trump: the DMZ as a geopolitical stage

The diplomatic process initiated in 2018 then reached a fully international dimension in June of the following year, in 2019, when the DMZ became the stage for the meeting between United States President Donald Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un. The event was anticipated by a tweet published by Trump during the G20 summit in Osaka on the social network now known as “X”, in which the American president expressed his willingness to meet Kim Jong-un “at the Border/DMZ” simply to shake his hand and say hello. Although formulated in an informal and totally spontaneous way, the message immediately contributed to transforming the DMZ into a global media space, attracting international attention toward the Korean border (La Repubblica, 2019), after the North Korean leader agreed to meet the American tycoon.

The meeting subsequently took place in Panmunjom, within the Joint Security Area (JSA), a place already strongly charged with symbolic meaning following the inter-Korean summits of 2018. On that occasion, Trump became the first sitting United States president to enter, although only briefly, North Korean territory by crossing the Military Demarcation Line

together with Kim Jong-un (ANSA, 2019).

After crossing the border, the two leaders continued their meeting on the South Korean side of the JSA, where they were also joined by South Korean President Moon Jae-in. The encounter included an informal conversation lasting approximately fifty minutes, during which the willingness to resume negotiations concerning the North Korean nuclear program and security on the Korean Peninsula was expressed (La Repubblica, 2019).

However, the significance of the event goes beyond the simple diplomatic dimension. The presence of the President of the United States inside the DMZ contributed to transforming Panmunjom from a symbol of Korean division into a diplomatic platform, elevating it to an even broader and global level. For a brief moment, the most militarized border of the Asian Cold War ceased to represent exclusively separation and hostility, becoming instead an international space of political visibility, negotiation and global diplomatic performance. In this sense, the DMZ definitively consolidated itself as one of the most powerful symbolic landscapes of contemporary politics, capable of concentrating historical memory and international media representation.

Figure 14. *Donald Trump and Kim Jong-un shake hands during their 2019 meeting in the Joint Security Area, at the border between the two Koreas.*



Source: ANSA (<https://www.ansa.it/sito/photogallery/primopiano/2019/06/30/donald-trump-e-kim-jong-un-storica-stretta-di-mano> 2019)

3.5 The political performativity of the border

As observed in the previous sections, the Korean Demilitarized Zone has, over time, become the stage for official encounters between the leaders of the two Koreas, from which diplomatic declarations, agreements and joint documents have emerged.

Furthermore, the meeting held on June 30, 2019, between United States President Donald Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un further expanded the international relevance of the DMZ, transforming the Korean border into a space of both political and global media attention.

Although these meetings did not produce definitive changes or a permanent stabilization of inter-Korean relations, they nevertheless contributed to temporarily redefining the public perception of the DMZ, both within the Korean Peninsula and at the international level (Choung, 2021). In this sense, the border ceased, at least momentarily, to represent exclusively separation, hostility and militarization, instead assuming the role of a symbolic space of dialogue and negotiation.

Drawing on the perspective of the geographer Denis Cosgrove, landscape can be interpreted as a true “way of seeing”, namely as a cultural and symbolic construction through which individuals attribute meanings to space (Cosgrove, 1984). Applying this interpretation to the DMZ, the Korean border no longer appears solely as a geographical or military line, but rather as a landscape deeply charged with political, historical and ideological values. In particular, the diplomatic encounters that took place between 2018 and 2019 contributed to transforming the DMZ into a performative landscape, in which political practice and the symbolic dimension of space assumed a central role. Through highly ritualized gestures, such as the crossing of the demarcation line, the handshake between the leaders and the commemorative tree planting ceremony, the border was temporarily reinterpreted and “staged” as a space of reconciliation rather than conflict.

In addition, following the approach of non-representational geography⁵⁹, what becomes important is not only the landscape itself, but above all the practices and performances that pass through it (Chi and Lee, 2018). Within this theoretical framework, the Korean

⁵⁹ Non-representational geography (or non-representational theory) is an approach within human geography developed during the 1990s, primarily associated with the work of British geographer Nigel Thrift. Rather than focusing exclusively on the representation and description of space, this perspective emphasizes everyday practices, embodied experiences, emotions and perceptions, examining how individuals actively experience, perform and construct places through daily interactions.

Demilitarized Zone represents a particularly significant case, as it constitutes a space in which the geopolitical reality of Korean division materially manifests itself through architecture, but also through political rituals, media images and diplomatic practices (Choung, 2018).

The DMZ thus becomes a dynamic and, above all, performative landscape, continuously reinterpreted through the political actions that take place within it. Precisely for this reason, the inter-Korean border can be considered not only as a territorial barrier, but also as a symbolic space capable of continuously producing new narratives that constantly reshape both its role and the perception of the Korean and international public (*Ibidem*).

Especially after the events that took place in recent years, analyzed throughout the previous sections of this research, the DMZ has increasingly become the focus of international attention. The perception of the Korean Demilitarized Zone has been profoundly shaped not only by the political events held within it, but also by the media representations and visual narratives constructed by both the international and domestic press.

For the majority of individuals, the DMZ is not a space directly experienced in person, but rather a place known through television broadcasts, newspaper articles, documentaries, photographs, digital media and online report and as a consequence, the perception of the DMZ has been largely mediated and socially constructed through visual and journalistic representation.

As argued throughout this research, the DMZ and its surrounding spaces have historically been represented as a heavily militarized border, becoming one of the principal symbols and consequences of the 1953 Armistice Agreement signed at the end of the Korean War. For decades, the area has been represented as a landscape of tension, silence and division, where North and South Korean soldiers stand facing one another in the defense of their respective states. Despite its official designation as a “demilitarized” zone, the DMZ remains one of the most militarized places in the world, reinforcing its perception as a symbol of war, division and danger (Milani, 2014).

However, the events of 2018 temporarily transformed this narrative in a radically different direction. Indeed, media images and international coverage increasingly portrayed the DMZ through scenes of handshakes, diplomatic encounters and symbolic gestures performed by the leaders of the two Koreas. All the images of the crossing of the Military Demarcation Line,

the commemorative tree-planting ceremony and the informal interactions between the leaders contributed to reshaping the symbolic representation of the border.

In this context, diplomacy itself became part of a visual and performative narrative in which the DMZ no longer appeared exclusively as a space of hostility and separation, but also as a temporary landscape of reconciliation and political dialogue (*Ibidem*).

3.6 The DMZ as a space of propaganda and psychological warfare

While diplomatic encounters have contributed to portraying the DMZ as a space of dialogue and reconciliation, the border has simultaneously remained a site of ongoing psychological confrontation and symbolic competition between North and South Korea.

The Korean DMZ has been used as a communication frontier through which political narratives and national identity representations have circulated.

3.6.1 Loudspeaker propaganda and information warfare

For decades, the physical landscape of the DMZ has been intrinsically defined by acoustic penetration, in particular loudspeaker installations, positioned strategically along the border, represent one of the most enduring and direct manifestations of inter-Korean psychological operations. Far from being mere memories of the Cold War, these sonic devices have evolved into sophisticated instruments of information warfare, weaponizing the airwaves to breach the strict informational autarky maintained by the totalitarian regime in Pyongyang (Shin, 2016). Loudspeaker broadcasts function both as a powerful form of strategic leverage and asymmetric deterrence, and ,whenever military tensions escalate, such as during the landmine crises or border provocations, the resumption of South Korean broadcasts has consistently targeted the North Korean regime's primary vulnerability, its absolute monopoly on domestic information. By broadcasting real-time international news, economic indicators of South Korea's development, and direct critiques of the Kim dynasty's governance, Seoul directly undermines the ideological insularity of front-line North Korean soldiers (*Ibidem*).

Furthermore, this acoustic battleground has increasingly incorporated elements of soft power and cultural hegemony. The modern deployment of loudspeaker warfare goes beyond political rhetoric, considering that it systematically integrates South Korean popular culture, specifically K-pop music and cultural dispatches (Kim & Lee, 2022). This linguistic and cultural infiltration acts as a form of cognitive warfare.

The persistence of these practices demonstrates that the Korean border continues to operate as more than a line of territorial separation, remaining a site where information, symbols of national identity and political-economic supremacy and narratives are strategically mobilized in an attempt to influence perceptions and reinforce political legitimacy, transforming it into an auditory porous zone where the psychological foundation of the border is constantly challenged.

3.6.2 Balloon Campaigns and cross-border communication

Alongside loudspeaker broadcasts, another significant form of communication and confrontation between the two Koreas has taken place across the Korean border through the so-called balloon campaigns. Although the use of balloons for propagandistic purposes can be traced back to the period of the Korean War, in recent decades these activities have increasingly been conducted by non-governmental organizations, human rights activists and, above all, North Korean defectors residing in South Korea. Operating from areas located near the Demilitarized Zone, these groups have sought to circulate information across one of the most tightly controlled borders in the world by using balloons as a means of communication (BBC, 2024).

The balloons are generally used to transport a wide range of materials into North Korean territory, including anti-regime leaflets, religious pamphlets, banknotes, radios, USB flash drives and SD cards containing South Korean dramas, music and other forms of foreign media. The main objective of these campaigns is to challenge the strict control of information exercised by North Korea and to offer alternative narratives about life outside the country. In this sense, the balloons function as instruments of cross-border communication capable of bypassing the physical and political barriers that would normally prevent the circulation of information (Jung, 2014).

For supporters of these initiatives, the numerous balloon campaigns represent a genuine humanitarian effort aimed at expanding access to information and exposing North Korean citizens to sources of knowledge different from those available within the country.

At the same time, however, their political significance extends far beyond the humanitarian dimension, by the introduction of foreign cultural products and messages critical of the Pyongyang regime, these activities directly challenge the informational monopoly maintained by the state and are therefore perceived by North Korean authorities as a form of

psychological warfare (*Ibidem*).

The political implications of these campaigns have become particularly evident in recent years. In 2024, for example, tensions surrounding balloon launches experienced a significant escalation, as North Korea responded through numerous waves of balloons carrying propaganda materials, waste and debris into South Korean territory. Thousands of balloons crossed the border, reaching not only areas adjacent to the DMZ but also major urban centres such as Seoul, attracting considerable media attention and generating concerns regarding public safety and the stability of inter-Korean relations (BBC, 2024; CSIS, 2024).

These developments have also fuelled an intense debate within South Korea itself, in particular, one hand, activist groups defend the launches as an expression of freedom of speech and a legitimate form of humanitarian activism, while on the other hand, successive South Korean governments have periodically sought to restrict them in order to avoid possible military escalation and protect communities living in border areas. As a consequence, balloon campaigns have transformed the DMZ into a contested communication space in which issues of national security, freedom of expression and the management of inter-Korean relations intersect (Jung, 2014).

The reciprocal use of balloons by both Koreas demonstrates how the border continues to represent a space of psychological confrontation despite periodic attempts at diplomatic rapprochement. More than a simple line separating two political systems, the DMZ can be understood as a corridor through which information, symbols and competing narratives continue to circulate and in addition, in this sense, balloon campaigns illustrate how contemporary conflicts may be fought not only through military means but also through the strategic circulation of messages and representations capable of physically crossing, in this case, the highly controlled and heavily regulated inter-Korean border (*Ibidem*).

In this context, the DMZ acts as a paradoxical theater, it is a highly militarized zone where the primary currency of conflict is not physical ammunition, but rather the circulation of symbols, information, and ideological subversion, proving that the boundary remains a living and volatile front of an unresolved psychological war.

3.7 The globalization of the DMZ

The diplomatic developments that unfolded between 2018 and 2019 significantly

contributed to transforming the Korean Demilitarized Zone into a globally recognized symbolic and political space. In particular, the summits held at Panmunjom and the unprecedented and historical meeting between Donald Trump and Kim Jong-un attracted extraordinary international media coverage, shifting global attention toward the Korean border and its geopolitical significance (BBC, 2019).

As previously discussed, through the worldwide circulation of photographs, television broadcasts and digital media content, the DMZ progressively evolved from a regional military frontier into a global diplomatic landscape. Images of Moon Jae-in and Kim Jong-un crossing the Military Demarcation Line hand in hand, the symbolic tree-planting ceremony and the encounter between Trump and Kim within the Joint Security Area rapidly became iconic representations of contemporary diplomacy (CNN, 2018).

In this context, the border was no longer perceived solely as a site of division and military confrontation, but also as a space capable of hosting gestures of reconciliation and political negotiation.

Contemporary international politics increasingly operates through visual and symbolic performances capable of shaping public perceptions at a global scale (Callahan, 2020). The Korean DMZ represents a particularly significant example of this phenomenon, since its international relevance has been constructed not only through geopolitical tensions, but also through the visual narratives and diplomatic performances that have taken place within it.

The globalization of the DMZ also emerges through the growing international academic interest surrounding the area. In recent years, the border has increasingly become an object of interdisciplinary research connected to geopolitics, ecology, memory studies and visual culture.

The Korean Demilitarized Zone has progressively acquired meanings that extend beyond its military function, becoming simultaneously an ecological sanctuary, a symbolic landscape and a performative diplomatic environment (Winstanley-Chesters, 2019).

Furthermore, as we will address in the course of the research, the increasing visibility of the DMZ has contributed to the expansion of tourism and international curiosity toward the Korean border. Journalists, scholars, political observers and tourists have increasingly approached the area not only as a geopolitical frontier, but also as a symbolic site where the unresolved legacy of the Korean War remains materially visible. In this sense, the DMZ has

become part of a broader global imagination connected to division, security, reconciliation and international diplomacy (Choung, 2021).

The process of globalization has therefore transformed the Korean Demilitarized Zone into far more than a simple border separating two states. Through the reflection on borders and territoriality, contemporary borders increasingly function as social and symbolic processes rather than merely physical lines of separation (Paasi, 1998).

The DMZ perfectly embodies this duality, due to the fact that while remaining one of the most militarized borders in the world, it has simultaneously evolved into a globally recognized symbolic landscape where political tension, media representation and diplomatic imagination coexist together.

Lastly, the globalization process around the DMZ demonstrates how a border originally created to enforce division can progressively acquire international symbolic meanings that transcend its initial military purpose. Through diplomatic performances, and global political attention, the Korean Demilitarized Zone has become one of the most recognizable geopolitical landscapes of the contemporary world.

Chapter 4

The DMZ as a tourist and memorial landscape

4.1 Memorialization of the Korean War

The capacity of the Korean Demilitarized Zone to transcend its initial divisive purpose and acquire global recognition is distinctly rooted in the complex mechanisms of public remembrance. In this framework, it is necessary to introduce the concept of *memorialization*, which operates as a dynamic process through which societies actively interpret, preserve, and also transmit the weight of historical events and eventually collective trauma (Crownshaw, 2010).

Under this perspective, memory is far from a static archive or a frozen representation of historical facts. It instead undergoes a continuous process of reconstruction, shifting contemporary values constantly reshape the meanings attributed to past conflicts, turning commemorative spaces into active arenas where communities negotiate their sense of identity and historical legacy (*Ibidem*).

This intricate relationship between remembrance and societal structures, forms the core of memory studies, particularly through the framework of collective memory.

Remembrance cannot be reduced to an isolated cognitive or individual process, as personal recollections are invariably structured by broader social frameworks, institutional narratives, and shared cultural symbols (Halbwachs, 1992).

Individual experiences of the past are organized and kept through these overarching social mechanisms, which pass down historical narratives across generations and allow societies to define their current identity by reflecting on their history.

In particular, physical space plays an essential role in anchoring these abstract historical narratives.

Collective memory requires material reference points, physical environments, and tangible objects to stabilize itself and be visible over time (Halbwachs, 1992).

By transforming open landscapes and architectural sites into repositories of remembrance, societies embed their history directly into the physical environment and historical trauma thus becomes geographically tangible, allowing emotional and political meanings to be preserved across generations through concrete territorial markers.

The deep connection between territory and remembrance is heavily emphasized within cultural geography, where landscapes are viewed not merely as neutral physical backdrops but as complex cultural constructions (Cosgrove, 1984).

These spaces are constantly shaped by ideological priorities and shifting societal meanings, functioning as zones where history is materially sculpted into the land. Through the preservation of ruins, the demarcation of borders, and the consequent erection of dedicated infrastructures, communities transform physical geography into a powerful medium for cultural transmission (*Ibidem*)

However, the process of memorialization extends far beyond the mere physical existence of monuments or heritage sites. The actual significance of these spaces only emerges through the active interaction between the physical site and the individuals who experience it (Young, 1993).

Rather than being fixed or universally accepted, memory is constantly renegotiated through public ceremonies and highly subjective individual interpretations.

Visitors do not passively consume history, instead, they actively participate in producing meaning by projecting personal emotions and symbolic weight onto the landscape, making remembrance a fundamentally dynamic and performative act (Smith, 2006).

This dynamic naturally introduces a powerful political dimension to the act of remembrance. Commemorative practices frequently serve as tools for constructing national identity, forging a symbolic link between the past and the present through structured rituals and repetitive acts of public recollection (Hobsbawm, 1983).

The management of historical memory is deeply intertwined with political discourse, since institutional decisions regarding what to highlight, celebrate, or intentionally set aside reflect specific ideological agendas and as a consequence, memorial spaces often function as strategic instruments through which authorities legitimize authorized versions of national trauma and belonging.

Contemporary scholarship highlights that commemorative landscapes are not shaped exclusively by state-led institutional initiatives, but also by public reception and popular interpretation. Historical representations gain their true relevance through the ways they are both experienced and circulated within broader culture (Confino, 1997).

As a result, memorial sites should be approached as fluid environments where competing interpretations and divergent memories exist at the same time.

The meanings attached to these spaces are never entirely permanent, shifting continuously alongside broader transformations in the contemporary cultural landscape.

This theoretical matrix becomes exceptionally salient when applied to post-conflict landscapes and international borders. In these specific contexts, the physical environment does not just commemorate history, but it actively preserves the material traces of rupture, and territorial separation, turning geography into a living archive of trauma (Violi, 2017).

Unlike conventional monuments constructed long after hostilities have ceased, active post-conflict frontiers embody the ongoing and unresolved nature of historical friction, keeping the reality of past trauma visible in the present day (Till, 2005).

The Korean Demilitarized Zone stands as a vivid illustration of this spatial dynamic.

Indeed, the DMZ materializes the enduring and unresolved legacy of the Korean War through its specific landscapes, infrastructure, and symbolic representations, moving far beyond the mere role of a standard military boundary. The physical manifestation of division, that is evident in the continuous lines of barbed wire, military guard posts, advanced surveillance networks, active minefields, and deserted settlements, transforms the border into a tangible memorial landscape. Here, the trauma of national separation is kept deeply embedded within the physical territory itself (Kwon, 2010).

Due to the fact that the Korean War concluded with a temporary armistice agreement rather than a formal peace treaty, the peninsula remains frozen in a sort of suspended state between active conflict and lasting peace. Within this tense geopolitical reality, the DMZ functions simultaneously as a militarized frontier and a highly complex commemorative landscape that keeps the memory of national division still alive.

As argued, the border does not merely serve a defensive purpose, but it acts as a symbolic arena where the memory of the war is continuously reproduced and debated, carrying profound implications both for internal national identity and for international relations.

With the passage of time, this highly weaponized space has increasingly transitioned into a destination for public remembrance and educational tourism (Lennon & Foley, 2000; Kim & Thapa, 2018).

The establishment of border observatories, specialized museums, memorial parks, sculptures, villages, and organized guided excursions allows visitors to engage directly with the physical reality of the conflict.

Through these public practices, the division of the peninsula is transformed into a space where collective memory is materially experienced and emotionally processed by the public, reinforcing the narrative of shared trauma on a daily basis.

Ultimately, the Korean Demilitarized Zone is a perfect example that illustrates how contemporary memorialization relies on a tight intersection between memory, landscape, political discourse, and symbolic representation.

Rather than simply honoring a historical conflict that has concluded, the DMZ physically manifests the ongoing, unresolved consequences of the Korean War within today's global geopolitical scene.

It successfully preserves the painful memory of territorial separation while simultaneously serving as the primary site where new narratives concerning national identity, future and shared belonging are constantly generated, and where people, from tourists to scholars to locals, can learn about it and see it with their own eyes, mediated through tourist sites and the mandatory guides that grant access to the DMZ, directly visiting the very place where the war was fought and now lies silent.

4.2 DMZ Tourism and the commodification of division

As already addressed in the course of this research, the set objective is to demonstrate how the Korean DMZ is an extremely complex space characterized by strong dynamism. Indeed, it would be inappropriate and reductive to define and interpret it simply as a border line that has divided the same peninsula into two parts for over seventy years. For this reason, the attention of the following paragraph will focus on how the Demilitarized Zone is increasingly becoming a true cultural symbol and a tourist attraction, aimed both at showing Korean history and at transforming people's imagination into reality (Choung, 2021).

Within the DMZ, a profound paradox has progressively emerged and consolidated over the years, namely that between memory and its spectacularization. On the one hand, the border continues to represent the real material and symbolic synthesis of the consequences of a historical event that was decisive not only for Korean history but also for the international community in general, namely the Korean War and the 1953 Armistice. On the other hand, the area itself has become one of South Korea's principal tourist attractions, accessible and knowable almost exclusively from the South Korean side of the frontier. Hence, the DMZ presents itself both as a place of historical testimony and as a tourist and cultural site.

Before analyzing the specific case study in detail, it is necessary to introduce several theoretical references that are essential for understanding the transformation that has led the DMZ to become a cultural and tourist product.

Recent developments in studies on *place commodification* and contemporary *dark tourism*⁶⁰ have widely discussed the process through which a space of geopolitical separation and potential conflict is progressively converted into a genuine mass tourist attraction (Martini and Buda, 2020).

While much of the classical tourism literature focused primarily on a more authentic and highly structured search concerning the ways in which physical and historical spaces were artificially adapted in order to recreate an apparently direct and uncontaminated access to past events (MacCannell, 1973), more recent research instead highlights how the commercialization of trauma has nowadays become an increasingly widespread and complex cultural and semiotic operation.

In the case of the DMZ, it is the border itself that is progressively transformed into a consumable symbolic experience, capable of encapsulating geopolitical tension, historical memory and tourist entertainment.

In highly militarized contexts such as the Korean Demilitarized Zone, the frontier therefore ceases to function exclusively as a geopolitical barrier and instead becomes a symbolic and economic resource actively packaged for the global tourism market (Kim and Barber, 2022).

This transition inevitably entails a redefinition of the so-called *tourist gaze*, namely the lens through which tourists observe and interpret the places they visit (Grebenar, 2023). More specifically, the ideological tension and the latent sense of threat and danger perceived within the DMZ are progressively recontextualized within boundaries that are perceived as safe and distant from the historical events once hosted there (Ibidem).

The commodification of division thus materializes through the offering of specific artifacts and practices, ranging from the consumption of *kitsch* mementos, such as fragments of barbed wire transformed into souvenirs or military-themed objects, to panoramic observation platforms and guided tours designed to mediate the encounter between the visitor's experience and the memory of trauma (Grebenar and Stone, 2021).

⁶⁰ Dark tourism refers to travel to sites associated with death, suffering, disaster or atrocity. The term was introduced in tourism studies by Lennon and Foley (2000).

Within this tourist ecosystem, the commercialization of objects inside an area historically associated with geopolitical confrontation renders tangible the concept of the *kitschification* of trauma, whereby the dramatic object loses its original function as a threat and is reduced to a symbolic object of consumption, ultimately guaranteeing tourists a memorable yet perceived-as-safe experience.

Within this framework, institutional storytelling assumes a central role. Tourism service providers do not merely sell physical access to the border, but actively contribute to the construction of its public narrative, constantly oscillating between the dramatic spectacularization of conflict and educational or reconciliation-oriented purposes (Bessiere and Ahn, 2021).

What consequently emerges is a profound aesthetic as well as ethical tension, in which the need to preserve the historical value of collective memory systematically clashes with the logics of cultural capitalism and the consumption of places (Sharma, 2024).

Considering the paradox that exists between commodification and historical memory, it is necessary to recognize that the DMZ does not exist merely from the perspective of a static geopolitical line, but rather as a highly symbolic and socially constructed cultural landscape, shaped by the very dynamics of tourism (Hunter, 2013).

In the geopolitical context, the DMZ represents the perfect example of the archetype of an alienated borderland; indeed, according to the definition of an alienated borderland, it is defined by its character of total functional closure, the presence of a strong, deeply rooted geopolitical tension, and the absence of socio-economic and commercial relations, as well as interaction relationships between the populations residing in the two parts of the peninsula (Martinez, 1994). From this perspective, what occurs is the formation of a border that is militarily and ideologically controlled by military forces, leaving the area without a civil or communitarian reality. A true “no man’s land” without real human interactions (*Ibidem*).

Similarly to other historical realities, such as the Berlin Wall, which divided Germany into two exact parts, the DMZ plays the role of an attraction precisely by virtue of its prohibitive nature. Indeed, what emphasizes the tension and focus surrounding the DMZ is precisely the explicit and mandatory ban on crossing the demarcation line, which leads to the development of a particular focus by the tourist on the entire area and, above all, on what lies beyond it (Gelbman and Timothy, 2010). The consequence is a physical space transformed into a true

performative stage where the traumatic heritage and the very condition of geographical alienation are left to global and national cultural consumption (Hunter, 2013).

The radicalization of collective memory within the DMZ, structurally centered on the narrative of the past war and current tensions between the two Koreas, allows the border to act as an intricate social construction, which in turn derives from the practices of dark tourism, functioning both as a heritage of conflict and as a stage for fear, curiosity, and hope (Gelbman, 2008).

The trauma of an event such as the Korean War of 1950 is represented in the DMZ through specific material and spatial elements. Among these, in fact, it is possible to include civil infrastructure, which testifies to the sudden onset of the war and the abrupt interruption of daily life, military objects as symbols of violence, and highly symbolic border buildings, such as the Conference Row located in the Joint Security Area, or furthermore, the fences and their barbed wire (Gelbman, 2008). In this way, the heritage of the conflict is certainly kept alive thanks to the presence of both artifacts and tourist sites and, at the same time, is sold globally through the circulation of images, flyers, and advertisements (Hunter, 2013).

4.2.1 Tourism as a tool of soft power

First of all, the Demilitarized Zone can be visited solely and exclusively from the South Korean side and through tours organized by South Korean tour operators; it is not possible to visit the border independently. The capillary organization of highly structured guided tours ensures that this geographically and politically peripheral area is, in reality, heavily frequented. This planned anthropization allows tourists to actively participate in the ideological landscape promoted by the State, converting historically contested sites into spaces for cultural events (Sönmez, 1998).

In this context, the macro-political role of tourism emerges as a preeminent form of *soft power*⁶¹, capable of attracting international capital and, at the same time, strengthening territorial security and national prosperity (Leheny, 2006). However, the impact of this soft power differs profoundly depending on the target audience; indeed, while for domestic

⁶¹ Coined in the early 1990s by political scientist Joseph Nye, this concept denotes the ability of a State to influence the orientations and decisions of other international actors through cultural attraction, political values, and diplomacy, rather than through military or economic coercion (*hard power*). In the context of geopolitical tourism, soft power manifests itself in the capacity of a State to project a favorable national image and legitimate its own ideological positions through cultural consumption. See: Joseph S. Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2004).

Korean visitors, a trip to the DMZ constitutes a "patriotic duty" and a civil pilgrimage aimed at reaffirming identity belonging and the desire for national reunification, for international visitors, these same representations act as indexical signs of a "cold" nationalism, exerting an exotic and geopolitical fascination that drives tourists toward a border zone that would otherwise remain closed to human interaction (Hunter, 2013).

This performative dimension of the DMZ ultimately crystallizes in its iconic sites, which operate as true semiotic vectors of dark tourism. Many now-touristic sites, which will be analyzed subsequently, represent the historical nodes of the diplomatic fault line, where the physical proximity to the North dramatizes the perception of geopolitical tension (Hunter, 2013).

The DMZ therefore reveals itself as a complex social construction, whose identity is constantly renegotiated by political elites, wartime diplomacy, and the daily activities of the tourists themselves (*Ibidem*).

4.3 Major tourist sites on the South Korean side of the border

Firstly, it is necessary to clarify that the majority of tourist attractions associated with the Korean Demilitarized Zone are currently accessible through the South Korean side of the border. For this reason, the sites examined in this section refer primarily to locations developed and managed by South Korean institutions and tourism operators.

In order to visit the Korean Demilitarized Zone, it is absolutely necessary to join an organized tour departing from Seoul, as it is both prohibited and practically impossible to access the border independently.

Depending on the selected itinerary, visitors are taken to different sites and locations within the DMZ, all reached by the same bus used to travel from the capital to the border area.

During the highway journey toward the DMZ, as the border gradually approaches, the so-called "military checkpoints" begin to appear more frequently, signalling the increasing proximity to the inter-Korean frontier.

Just outside the Demilitarized Zone, all visitors are required to undergo security checks conducted by South Korean military personnel, who, in most cases, are very young soldiers completing their mandatory military service⁶² along the border.

⁶² Military Service is mandatory in South Korea for all men with no physical disability, between the ages of 18 and 35, with a duration ranging from 18 up to 21 months, depending on the military regiments. Women may voluntarily enlist, but they are not subject to compulsory conscription.

Two passport checks are carried out during the tour. During these inspections, armed soldiers, whose faces are almost entirely covered, leaving only their eyes visible, personally board the bus in order to meticulously inspect passports, cameras and video equipment, while also asking a few questions to the tour guide.

Only after successfully passing all security procedures is it possible to officially enter the strip of land separating South Korea from North Korea.

Figure 15. *One of the military checkpoints located along the road toward the Korean Demilitarized Zone.*



Source: author's own photograph, December 2025.

4.3.1 The Imjingak Complex. Between memorialization and entertainment

Located only seven kilometers from the Military Demarcation Line (MDL), Imjingak Park, also known as Imjingak Pyeonghwa-Nuri Park, is a tourist complex originally built in 1972 as a symbolic site representing the hope for a future reunification of the Korean Peninsula (Gyeonggi Provincial Government, n.d).

Imjingak Park represents the actual gateway to the DMZ and the closest location to the border line that both domestic and international visitors can freely access without being subjected to military security checks. Due to its access-free condition, it is now considered

one of the most famous and visited tourist sites connected to the DMZ, especially among foreign visitors.

Based on the considerations developed so far, it is therefore possible to argue that, precisely because of its unique location and its condition of free access, the site has become the perfect embodiment of the paradox between historical memory and commodification, transforming itself into one of the main symbols of tourism related to the Korean War, where the memory of national tragedy coexists with the phenomenon of mass tourism.

The traumatic legacy left by the conflict is represented through a series of symbols connected to division and war itself, which have contributed to attracting the curiosity and attention of the international community, while simultaneously fostering forms of patriotic tourism among the local population:

- ***The Freedom Bridge:*** Built in memory of those who lost their lives in North Korea while attempting to return to the southern part of the peninsula in order to reunite with their families and homeland. Originally known as Dokgaedari Bridge, its name was changed to the current one in 1953, after approximately 13,000 Korean and United Nations prisoners of war crossed it while returning from the North. Although the Freedom Bridge does not stand out for particular architectural features, it holds a significant heritage value as a site that bears witness to the war while simultaneously embodying the aspiration for freedom⁶³.
- ***The Gyeongui Railway:*** The Gyeongui Line represents one of the most symbolic infrastructures connected to the division of the Korean Peninsula. Historically, the railway functioned as the direct connection between Seoul and Pyongyang, but it was interrupted during the Korean War, which was later followed by the construction of the DMZ. Today, part of the railway symbolically ends near the border, concretely representing the separation between North and South Korea.⁶⁴

Within the symbolic framework of the DMZ, the railway becomes a concrete representation of the distance separating the two Koreas; at the same time, the

⁶³ Korea Tourism Organization. (n.d.). *Freedom Bridge (Jayu-ui Dari)*. Visit Korea. <https://english.visitkorea.or.kr>.

⁶⁴ Seoul Metropolitan Government. (n.d.). *Gyeongui Line Forest Park*. <https://english.seoul.go.kr/gyeongui-line-forest-park/>.

interrupted tracks seem to evoke the possibility of its future reopening and, consequently, the prospect of inter-Korean reconciliation.

- ***The Peace Bell:*** Built in 2000, the Peace Bell was designed to celebrate the arrival of the new millennium: it weighs 21 tons and can be reached by climbing 21 steps, precisely in honor of the beginning of the twenty-first century (Gyeonggi Provincial Government, n.d). However, even in this case it is possible to observe the strong tourist dimension that the Peace Bell has assumed. Ringing the bell has in fact become a purchasable experience costing approximately 10,000 won, transforming its commemorative function into a commercial tourist activity⁶⁵.

The DMZ also becomes a space of spectacle through other areas and symbols located within Imjingak Park:

- ***Pyeonghwa Nuri Park:*** A large park with a capacity of approximately 20,000 people. The area is used to host performances and cultural events through attractions such as the *Pavilion of the Candle of Life* and the *Global Cafe Annyeong*, contributing to the transformation of one of the most militarized and symbolically tense borders in the world into a relaxed space of cultural consumption (Gyeonggi Provincial Government, n.d).
- ***The DMZ Peace Train and Camp Greaves:*** The intersection between entertainment and trauma reaches its peak through the additional tourist services connected to the area. The DMZ Peace Train offers themed cabins, cafés and “photo-zones” along the route toward the border. Even more emblematic is the case of Camp Greaves, a former base of the United States 506th Infantry Division returned in 2007, which has now been transformed into a youth hostel where visitors can participate in military-themed entertainment programs such as the *Security OX Quiz* or the *Challenge DMZ Golden Bell*⁶⁶.

It is therefore possible to observe how these elements contribute to making the Demilitarized Zone an extremely contradictory space: on the one hand, a place characterized by separation and division; on the other, a site of cultural experience and tourist attraction.

⁶⁵ Gyeonggi Provincial Government. (n.d.). *Imjingak / DMZ*. <https://english.gg.go.kr/dmz-imjingak/>

⁶⁶ *Ibidem*.

Moreover, the presence of other tourist attractions, such as the Panoramic Suspension Bridge, further shows how the landscape of the DMZ is being reinterpreted in order to make it accessible and visitable as a space associated with conflict and separation. In this way, the border appears not only as a real militarized frontier, but also as a highly tourist site where the experience of geopolitical tension is transformed into a consumable attraction.

Figure 16. *The Peace Bell at the DMZ.*



Source: Trip.com (2026) /<https://www.trip.com/moments/detail/paju-si-14746-15425006/>

Figure 17. Millions of prayer ribbons as a sign of peace tied at the demilitarized zone DMZ at the freedom bridge.



Source: author's own photograph, December 2025.

- ***The Wind Hill***

The territorial complex of Imjingak also hosts another symbolically significant site, the *Wind Hill*, located within the Imjingak Pyeonghwa Nuri Park in Paju, approximately 7 kilometres from the border (Chung, 2021).

It is a place visited by thousands of tourists, as well as by South Koreans and residents of the surrounding areas on a daily basis.

The site consists of a large green hill featuring an artistic installation composed of hundreds of small colourful pinwheels which, driven by the wind, spin continuously.

Wind Hill is an extremely symbolic cultural space because it represents the aspired reunification of the Korean Peninsula, embodied by the free movement of the wind travelling back and forth between South Korea and North Korea (*Ibidem*).

Figure 18. *The Wind Hill in Imjingak Pyeonghwa Nuri Park in Paju.*



Source: Visit Korea (2026) / https://tong.visitkorea.or.kr/cms/resource_etc/67/3578167_image2_1.jpg

4.3.2 The Third Infiltration Tunnel

One of the most visited sites during a tour of the Demilitarized Zone is the Third Infiltration Tunnel, which embodies one of the most significant examples of dark tourism on the Korean Peninsula.

Although the first suspicions regarding its existence date back to 1975, following the revelations of the North Korean defector Kim Bu-seong, who claimed that his country had constructed a series of secret passageways (Seoul City Tour, n.d.), the Third Infiltration Tunnel was officially discovered on 17 October 1978. It is one of the four tunnels believed to have been excavated by North Korea as a means of military infiltration into South Korean territory (Paju City Government, n.d.).

Today, it constitutes one of the main attractions included in DMZ tours and allows visitors to confront directly and physically one of the most tangible manifestations not only of the division of Korea, but also of the hostility that continues to characterize inter-Korean relations.

According to recent studies on tourism in the DMZ, the Third Infiltration Tunnel simultaneously presents educational, emotional, and, above all, immersive components, deriving from the possibility for visitors to physically experience a place originally designed for military purposes (Hwang, 2023).

Unlike other sites within the area, such as memorials or observation platforms, the tunnel requires direct bodily participation and adherence to specific rules, transforming the visitor from a simple observer and listener into a subject actively involved in the experience of the site itself (*Ibidem.*).

The experience of visiting the Third Infiltration Tunnel is carefully structured from the very beginning through a precise narrative framework. Before entering the tunnel, visitors are required to watch an introductory video of approximately ten minutes presenting the history of the structure and the geopolitical context that led to the division of the Korean Peninsula (Paju City Government, n.d.).

Referring to studies focusing on DMZ tourism storytelling, tour guides and informational materials already play a fundamental role in shaping visitors' perceptions of the conflict (Bessiere and Ahn, 2021). In the case of the Third Infiltration Tunnel, the introductory film places considerable emphasis on the threat posed by North Korean military activities and introduces particularly alarming elements, including the possibility that additional tunnels may still remain undiscovered, thereby emotionally preparing visitors for the experience that follows (Leyland, 2017). This narrative framing is reinforced by a series of strict security protocols that further strengthen the perception of being in a space still closely associated with military activity and secrecy. These include the absolute prohibition of photography and video recording, accompanied by the mandatory requirement to place personal electronic devices in designated lockers secured with padlocks.

The visit to the tunnel is characterized by a strong physical and sensory dimension. First, visitors are required to wear protective helmets and are informed that they must walk down a steep descent of approximately 350 metres in order to reach a depth of 73 metres below ground level and arrive at the end point of the route (Paju City Government, n.d.).

The tunnel presents itself as a dark, humid, and particularly narrow space, where visitors are forced to walk in a bent position in order to avoid hitting the rocky ceiling. Geopolitical tension is thus translated into a concrete physical sensation, transforming the conflict into an

experience that can be perceived through the body itself. This bodily engagement constitutes one of the central elements of the tourist experience (Hwang, 2023).

The climax of the underground route is represented by a concrete barrier that prevents further access and marks the proximity of the Military Demarcation Line. Through a small opening resembling a window, visitors attempt to observe the space beyond, often expecting a moment of significant visual impact (Leyland, 2017). However, it is precisely at this point that one of the most interesting aspects of the tunnel experience emerges. The visual encounter with a simple concrete wall and a small opening, after the long descent and the physical effort required to reach them, may initially generate a sense of anti-climax and apparent disappointment among visitors. This perception, however, is rapidly reinterpreted through the explanations provided by the tour guide, who constantly draws attention to the geopolitical significance of the site, reminding visitors that the small opening represents one of the closest points from which North Korean territory can be observed and that they are standing physically adjacent to the Military Demarcation Line. In this way, what initially appears to be a rather underwhelming outcome gradually transforms into an awareness of the concrete reality of the Korean division (*Ibidem*).

Paradoxically, it is during the ascent back to the surface that this perception continues to evolve, as the awareness of having reached the physical limits of North Korea and of having traversed a space originally constructed for a potential military invasion generates a deeper reflection on the persistence of the Korean conflict. In this sense, the tunnel renders tangible what is normally perceived only through media representations or political discourse. The division of the peninsula assumes a concrete and material form, allowing visitors to directly experience the physical proximity of both the border and the geopolitical tensions associated with it (Leyland, 2017; Hwang, 2023).

Finally, the external area completes this process through the presence of symbolic sculptures, observation points, and souvenir shops aimed at tourists (Paju City Government, n.d.). In line with the dynamics of contemporary dark tourism, the emotional involvement and tension generated during the underground experience are subsequently reabsorbed into a broader tourist and commercial circuit, in which conflict and the memory of division become objects of cultural consumption (Hwang, 2023). The Third Infiltration Tunnel therefore represents one of the clearest examples of the paradox that characterizes the contemporary DMZ: a

space originally conceived for military purposes that is now visited, interpreted, and consumed as a tourist attraction.

Figure 19. *The third infiltration tunnel.*



Source: Seoul City Tour (2008)

Figure 20. *The mandatory safety helmets for entering the Third Infiltration Tunnel.*



Source:K- SCAR (2026) / <https://k-scar.com/dorasan-station/>

4.3.3 Dora Observatory

Also the Dora Observatory occupies a particularly significant position for this research, especially for its role as a space used for the direct visual observation of North Korea.

The observatory is situated in the city of Paju, in the province of Gyeonggi, at the northernmost point of the Military Demarcation Line.

The observatory was opened to the public for the first time in January of 1987 and replaces the previous Songaksan Observation Post (Koreaetour, n.d.; Paju DMZ, n.d.).

Reconstructed in a new position in 2018, it is today one of the most visited attractions of the entire Demilitarized Zone, attracting every year hundreds of thousands of visitors, not only international tourists, but also South Korean citizens and North Korean refugees (Paju DMZ, n.d.).

From the panoramic platform it is possible to observe numerous places situated beyond the border, including the North Korean city of Kaesong, Mount Songak, the propaganda village of Kijŏng-dong⁶⁷, the agricultural cooperatives and, on particularly clear days, even the Kaesong Industrial Complex (Visit Korea, n.d.; Paju DMZ, n.d.). The observation, besides with the naked eye, takes place through the use of dozens of telescopes and binoculars with which the site is equipped, which allow to observe in detail the North Korean territory, transforming the act itself of looking into the central element of the visit experience.

Just like for the Third Infiltration Tunnel, the entrance to the observatory is rigidly regulated. Since it is situated inside the Civilian Control Zone⁶⁸, it is not allowed to visit it autonomously and tourists are constantly monitored by the accompanying guides, since also in this case there is an absolute prohibition to photograph or make video recordings. In addition, all visitors are required to bring with them a valid identity document and to pass a series of military controls before being able to access the area (Visit Korea, n.d.; Koreaetour, n.d.). As already addressed, these procedures are common in different areas of the DMZ, and the same contribute to reinforcing the perception of entering a highly controlled and strongly militarized space.

The experience offered by the Dora Observatory can be interpreted through the concept of tourist gaze, according to which tourism is based on particular modalities of observation that

⁶⁷ The North Korean 'Peace Village'.

⁶⁸ A buffer area immediately south of the southern boundary of the DMZ, in which civilian access and activity are restricted for security reasons.

transform places, landscapes and objects into attractions worthy of being seen. The tourist gaze does not represent therefore a neutral act, but a practice socially and culturally constructed, modeled by expectations and subjective interpretive devices (Urry, 2000).

In the case of the Dora Observatory, visitors do not limit themselves simply to observing a neighboring Country, but participate in a carefully mediated visual experience, through which North Korea is transformed into a real tourist attraction.

Unlike the Third Infiltration Tunnel, where the visitor physically experiences a space associated with the conflict, at the Dora Observatory the border is consumed through sight rather than through bodily immersion.

Telescopes, panoramic platforms, informational panels and explanations of the guides contribute collectively to directing attention toward specific points of interest, transforming the geopolitical tension into a spectacle observable from a safe distance.

This process reveals one of the main paradoxes of tourism in the DMZ. North Korea, traditionally represented as a hostile, inaccessible and potentially threatening space, is simultaneously transformed into an object of curiosity and visual consumption. Visitors gather around the telescopes in the attempt to observe daily life on the other side of the border, in search of signs of normalcy within a territory that remains physically unreachable. The observatory assumes therefore the role of liminal space between proximity and distance; in fact, on one side it is possible to see clearly the North Korean territory, on the other remains an absolute separation that makes impossible any form of direct contact.

The centrality of visual consumption emerges in an even more evident way precisely through the use of the telescopes installed along the panoramic platform, because these instruments allow visitors to observe villages, agricultural areas, mountains and infrastructures situated beyond the border, making possible a visual contact with a territory normally perceived as distant and inaccessible (Kunwar, 2017). The act itself of observation becomes thus the main attraction of the site.

Another particularly interesting element concerns the fact that, in the past, some of these binoculars functioned through the insertion of a coin; even today it is possible to observe the slots intended for payment, despite the devices being by now usable for free. The presence of these mechanisms represents a significant example of how even the act of observing North Korea has been, at least in part, the object of commodification.

The possibility of paying to obtain a closer view of the North Korean territory shows in fact how the geopolitical division and the curiosity towards the "other side" can be transformed into a consumable tourist experience (Thapa, 2021).

In this sense, what is sold is not only a panoramic view, but the experience itself of being able to observe one of the most isolated and difficult accessible countries of the world.

The curiosity that characterizes many visitors of the DMZ appears strongly influenced by the international image of North Korea, constructed over time through media representations, political discourses and narratives linked to the conflict.

For many tourists, the satisfaction derives less from what is effectively observed through the lenses and more from the awareness of finding oneself in front of a territory that for decades has been associated with tension and isolation (Kunwar, 2017).

Figure 21. *A group of tourists looking towards the binoculars on the Dora Observatory.*



Source: CNN travel (2018) / <https://edition.cnn.com/travel/gallery/korean-dmz-tourism-photos>.

Figure 22. *Flagpole⁶⁹ War at the Korean Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) Border.*



Source: Photographed by Greta Tarasconi taken off an exhibition panel on-site at the DMZ, South Korea. Date taken (December 2025). Original work: Unknown author, Public Domain.

Figure 23. *The North Korean landscape visible from the Dora Observatory.*



Source: One Man One Map (2017)/
<https://www.oneman-onemap.com/en/2017/12/11/one-day-in-the-demilitarized-zone-between-north-and-south-korea/>

⁶⁹ The "flagpole war" refers to the Cold-War-era competition between South Korea's Daeseong-dong ("Freedom Village") and North Korea's Kijŏng-dong, in which each side erected progressively taller flagpoles facing the other across the DMZ.

4.3.4 Dorasan Station

Among the sites included in the tours of the Demilitarized Zone, Dorasan Station represents one of the most significant symbolic places associated with aspirations for the reunification of the Korean Peninsula. Located approximately 650 metres from the southern boundary of the DMZ, it currently constitutes the last railway station of the South Korean railway network before the border with North Korea (Visit Korea, n.d.).

The station is situated along the historic Gyeongui railway line, which was built between 1902 and 1906, during the period of Japanese occupation, with the aim of connecting and facilitating travel between Seoul, Pyongyang and Sinuiju, a city located on the border with China (K-SCAR, 2026). The railway line represented an extremely important and strategic connection. Before the division of the Peninsula, it was one of the main railway axes in Northeast Asia, allowing Korea to be strategically connected with Manchuria and the Trans-Siberian Railway (Nakano, 2007). However, the Korean War of 1950 and the subsequent creation of the Demilitarized Zone in 1953 permanently interrupted the railway connection, leaving the line divided at the border and transforming the station into a symbol of suspension and distance.

What remains today is Dorasan Station, which was inaugurated in 2002.

Dorasan Station was in fact part of a much broader plan aimed at restoring railway connections between the two Koreas and was promoted particularly by South Korean President Kim Dae-jung and his policy of openness and cooperation towards North Korea, the so-called Sunshine Policy.

Not surprisingly, the inauguration took place in the presence of both the South Korean leader and U.S. President George W. Bush, strengthening the diplomatic and political relationship between South Korea and the United States while also confirming the symbolic value attributed to the railway infrastructure (K-SCAR, 2026).

In the following years, it genuinely appeared possible that Dorasan could become the main railway connection point between Seoul and Pyongyang. Indeed, in 2007, a first train crossed the Military Demarcation Line, connecting South Korea with the North Korean city of Kaesong, while a freight service was established to support the Kaesong Industrial Complex, one of the most important economic cooperation projects between the two countries (K-SCAR, 2026).

During that period, facilities for passport control and customs operations were even installed inside the station in anticipation of a future international railway service between the two Koreas.

However, these expectations never found practical implementation.

The progressive deterioration of inter-Korean relations, the end of the Sunshine Policy, and the tensions related to North Korea's nuclear programme led to the suspension of railway connections and the abandonment of infrastructure integration projects.

No regular passenger service between Seoul and Pyongyang ever became operational, and freight traffic permanently ceased in 2008 (K-SCAR, 2026).

More recently, in 2024, North Korea even destroyed part of the railway infrastructure located beyond the border, further reinforcing perceptions of distance and undermining hopes for reunification, which appears increasingly remote (K-SCAR, 2026).

It is precisely this failure that makes Dorasan Station particularly interesting from a tourism perspective today.

Unlike a conventional railway station, it is not visited for its original function of transportation and connectivity, but rather for the symbolic meaning that has come to be attributed to it. South Korean citizens, as well as thousands of international tourists, do not travel to Dorasan in order to board a train, but rather to observe an infrastructure built for a future that has not yet materialised and to experience firsthand the effects of a conflict that still persists today (Hwang, 2023).

The entire complex appears to preserve the material traces of an unfinished and failed project. The station still hosts railway platforms, passport control counters, customs areas, and logistical facilities, all of which continue to exist despite no longer performing the function for which they were originally designed.

Particularly significant is the famous sign indicating the direction to Pyongyang, probably one of the most photographed elements by visitors. It represents a connection that was physically possible and almost realised, yet ultimately prevented by war and political and diplomatic divisions, thus becoming a powerful metaphor for the condition of the contemporary Korean Peninsula.

From this perspective, Dorasan Station differs from the other sites located within the DMZ. While the Third Infiltration Tunnel materialises the threat of invasion and attack, and the

Dora Observatory transforms North Korea into an object of observation, Dorasan Station instead becomes the materialisation of a hope for reconciliation.

It does not merely testify to the division of the Peninsula, but preserves the expectation of its eventual reconnection and reunification (Hunter, 2013; Hwang, 2023).

In this case as well, a process of border commodification emerges. Thanks to its inclusion as an essential stop within organised DMZ tours, the station is now consumed as a tourist and photographic experience.

Visitors walk through spaces designed for journeys that never began, observe infrastructures that were never used despite being intended to connect two countries that remain divided, and take photographs in front of symbols of reunification that exist primarily within the collective imagination. The hope for a future reconnection of the Peninsula is thus incorporated into the tourism experience and transformed into a consumable cultural resource (Hunter, 2013; Kim and Barber, 2022).

Dorasan Station therefore becomes not only a railway infrastructure but, like many of the spaces that compose the DMZ, a place of memory and hope, where the border is transformed into a tourist attraction and the possibility of a different future itself becomes an object of cultural consumption (Hunter, 2013; Hwang, 2023).

Figure 24. *The sign at Dorasan Station indicating the stop for the North Korean Capital, Pyongyang.*



Source: K-SCAR (2026) /<https://k-scar.com/dorasan-station/>

4.3.5 Commercialization and tourist consumption in the DMZ

Beyond the historical and military sites discussed so far, the research must focus on another evident sign of the commodification of the DMZ, which becomes particularly visible through the numerous commercial and recreational facilities that have been established over the years within the DMZ itself, in the Imjingak tourist complex and in the areas surrounding the border. Alongside places of memory and commemoration, as well as near the Military Demarcation Line, attractions and experiences designed solely for the entertainment of visitors have progressively been introduced, such as the DMZ Gondola, the DMZ Experience Center, photography areas, interactive installations, and even small amusement parks (K-SCAR, 2026).

It is necessary to emphasize that it is not even possible to directly observe North Korean territory from Imjingak, yet it remains a site characterised by a large influx of visitors and the presence of numerous attractions. Logically, for the purposes of the present research, this aspect assumes particular relevance, as it demonstrates how the tourism experience has progressively surpassed the strictly geopolitical value of the site (K-SCAR, 2026).

Particularly significant is also the role played by the numerous souvenir shops, which allow visitors to purchase objects closely linked to the imagery of Korean division and the militarization of the border. Among the products available for sale are hats and mugs bearing the DMZ logo, military-themed T-shirts, reproductions of North Korean banknotes, DMZ cookies, as well as bullet-shaped keychains and even grenade-shaped water bottles (K-SCAR, 2026). Through these objects, the conflict and the memory of division are transformed into material goods that can be purchased and transported, while the border itself is stripped of its primary role as a space of division, becoming a tourist attraction that allows visitors to preserve and take home a tangible testimony of their experience at the border.

The transformation of the DMZ into a space of consumption also emerges through the growing presence of commercial facilities that appear increasingly distant from the imagery traditionally associated with one of the most heavily militarized borders in the world. A particularly emblematic example is represented by the presence of a Starbucks Café, the well-known American coffee multinational founded in 1971, which was opened in 2024 at Aegibong, within the Civilian Control Zone and directly overlooking North Korean territory. Thanks to its “strategic” location, numerous visitors are able to reach the café every day and consume a coffee while observing North Korea on the opposite side of the Han River estuary, with the possibility of taking photographs and recording videos, thereby transforming a place of geopolitical tension into a space of everyday consumption (K-SCAR, 2026).

The photographic dimension also assumes a central role. Along the tourist route, numerous photo spots and specially designed areas are present in order to allow visitors to immortalize their presence at the border. In some cases, such installations appear particularly paradoxical, as in the case of photo spots located near minefields or areas associated with conflict, where danger and the memory of war are reinterpreted as a backdrop for the production of images intended for sharing and personal consumption (K-SCAR, 2026).

These elements highlight one of the main paradoxes of contemporary tourism in the DMZ. Indeed, although the border continues to represent a space of separation and one of the most dangerous borders in the world due to its extreme militarization, it is simultaneously transformed into a place of entertainment, consumption, and experience production. In this sense, the DMZ no longer constitutes solely a landscape of memory or a military frontier, but also a tourism product within which the conflict itself is reinterpreted, spectacularized, and commercialized for visitor consumption (Hunter, 2013; Hwang, 2023).

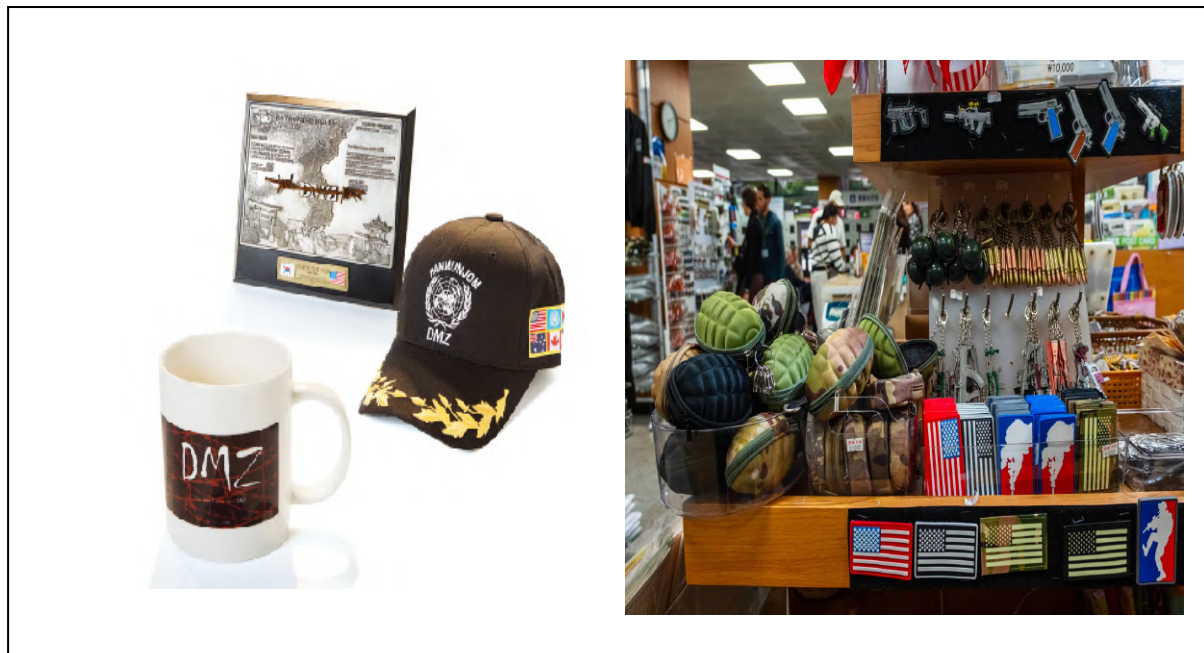
4.3.6 The DMZ as a cultural landscape

Beyond its historical and military dimension, the DMZ has also progressively been reinterpreted as a cultural space through which messages of peace, dialogue, and reconciliation can be promoted. In recent years, both local and regional institutions have developed numerous artistic and cultural initiatives with the aim of modifying the image traditionally associated with the Demilitarized Zone, which for a long time has been perceived exclusively as a symbol of division and tension between the two Koreas (Choung, 2021).

Among the most significant examples is certainly the DMZ International Documentary Film Festival, an event that uses the language of cinema to stimulate reflections on themes of peace, human rights, memory, and the division of the Korean Peninsula. Similarly, the Yeoncheon DMZ International Music Festival promotes the dissemination of ideals of cooperation and coexistence through classical music, contributing to strengthening the image of the DMZ as a place of encounter rather than separation (*Ibidem*).

These initiatives demonstrate how the landscape of the DMZ is no longer interpreted exclusively as evidence of an unresolved conflict, but also as a space used to produce and disseminate alternative cultural meanings. Through artistic events, festivals, and cultural programmes, the border is progressively transformed into a symbolic place that conveys messages of peace and future reconciliation. Although this may be interpreted as a rather contradictory aspect if we conceive of the DMZ as a border that divides a single peninsula into two parts, in this sense the DMZ can be understood as a genuine cultural landscape, within which aspirations for reunification intertwine with the construction of new collective narratives (Choung, 2021).

Figure 25. *Souvenir items available for purchase at the various retail outlets located throughout the DMZ*



Source: Visit Korea (2023) / <https://english.visitkorea.or.kr/svc/contents/contentsView.do?menuSn=929&dataSetId=262&vcontsId=249594>

Figure 26. *DMZ tourist photo spot at Imjingak Park within the DMZ tourism complex.*



Source: K-SCAR (2026) / <https://k-scar.com/dmz-tours/>

4.4 Tourist perceptions and representations of the DMZ

The analysis conducted so far has examined the historical evolution of the DMZ and its transformation into a tourism destination. However, understanding the significance of the DMZ also needs to consider how it is perceived by those who decide to visit it. In fact, the meanings attributed to the border could vary according to visitors' cultural backgrounds and relationships with the Korean conflict. Furthermore, these perceptions are not formed exclusively through direct observation, but are also influenced by the narratives and interpretations provided throughout the tourism experience, particularly by tour guides and other mediating actors.

For this reason, the following sections will examine the perceptions of domestic and international visitors, as well as the role of tourism narratives in shaping the perception of the DMZ.

4.4.1 Perception among domestic and international tourists

The perception of the Korean Demilitarized Zone varies significantly according to the cultural and geographical background of visitors. Although the DMZ represents a highly interesting place for everyone, the meanings attributed to this space differ considerably between South Korean tourists and international visitors, reflecting different levels of emotional involvement and different relationships with the history of the division of the Korean Peninsula (Shin, 2008).

For a large proportion of international tourists, the DMZ is primarily perceived as a unique destination within the global tourism landscape. Its appeal is mainly derived from the opportunity to access and visit one of the most heavily militarized borders and one of the areas characterized by the highest levels of geopolitical tension in the world, as well as to observe closely a reality that continues to occupy a central role in the international imagination and diplomatic sphere.

Furthermore, the attraction of the DMZ is closely linked to its status as one of the last remaining physical and operational legacies of the Cold War. Unlike other iconic symbols of that period, such as the Berlin Wall, which disappeared following German reunification, the Korean DMZ continues to function as an active border separating two states that remain technically at war. For many international visitors, the possibility of experiencing firsthand

one of the last surviving frontiers of the Cold War constitutes an important element of the site's appeal (Choung, 2021).

From this perspective, the DMZ is mainly associated with curiosity and the discovery of a place perceived as exceptional and unique. In the event of a future opening of the border, international visitors tend to envision tourism development that is more oriented towards leisure tourism and recreational activities (Shin, 2006).

On the other hand, the perception of South Korean visitors appears more complex and deeply connected to national history. For many South Korean citizens, the DMZ does not represent exclusively a tourist destination, but also a symbolic place that recalls the memory of the war, the division of the peninsula, and the prospects of future reunification. Consequently, domestic tourists show a stronger preference for forms of tourism associated with environmental conservation, peace-building, and historical memory, such as ecotourism, peace tourism, and battlefield tourism (Shin, 2006).

A further element that seems to confirm the different relationship established with the DMZ concerns the frequency of visits. While more than 90% of international visitors report being in the area for the first time, South Korean tourists show a greater tendency to return to the site over time. Only 58.3% of domestic visitors are visiting the DMZ for the first time, whereas 23.8% report having visited the area at least a second time, compared to 6.6% of international tourists, and almost 18% have returned three or more times (Shin, 2006). This finding suggests that, for a significant portion of the South Korean population, the Demilitarized Zone does not represent merely an occasional tourist attraction, but continues to maintain a symbolic and identity-related value that justifies repeated visits over time.

These differences can be clearly understood in light of the different relationships that the two groups maintain with the Korean conflict. For part of the South Korean population, particularly among older generations, the Korean War and the separation between North and South still constitute elements of family and collective memory. International visitors, by contrast, tend to observe the DMZ from a more detached perspective, interpreting it primarily as a place of geopolitical interest and as an exceptional tourist attraction (Shin, 2006).

Despite these differences, some common aspects can also be identified. Both domestic and international visitors generally display positive attitudes towards cooperation between the two Koreas and recognise the potential of the DMZ as a space for dialogue and encounter. In

particular, peace and political stability are perceived as fundamental conditions for the enhancement of the area and for its future tourism development (Shin, 2006). Consequently, the importance attributed to peace and cooperation suggests a gradual symbolic reinterpretation of the DMZ, whose meaning increasingly extends beyond its original function as a military border and space of separation.

In this context, the Demilitarized Zone emerges as a destination characterised by a plurality of meanings resulting from two different perspectives. While for many international visitors it primarily represents a place of geopolitical exceptionalism and tourist curiosity, for South Korean citizens and visitors it continues to constitute a symbol of national memory, division, and aspirations for the reunification of the peninsula. The coexistence of these different interpretations contributes to making the DMZ a complex and symbolically significant site within the contemporary landscape (Shin, 2006).

4.4.2 The Role of tour guides in shaping perception

The Korean Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) is a particularly significant place within the landscape of contemporary tourism. As a context characterized by strong political sensitivity and a constant military presence, the tour guide does not exclusively perform an informative function, but assumes a central role in mediating the visitor experience, acting as an interpreter of the place (Öter, 2016). The awareness that visitors develop towards the DMZ does not derive solely from the direct observation of the territory and its tourist sites, but also from the influence exerted by the narratives presented during the tour and, in particular, by the storytelling practices adopted by the guides (Mathisien, 2012).

Through storytelling, the visit acquires an interpretative dimension that allows tourists to attribute meanings to the place and to construct a more articulated understanding of the reality of the border (*Ibidem*).

This narrative process is based in particular on the use of seven main components: empathy, interaction, personal storytelling, entertainment, authenticity, education, and authority (Choi, 2013). Furthermore, guides frequently make use of personal anecdotes and stories related to the human consequences of division, such as the experiences of families separated by the conflict or the stories of their own relatives who came from North Korea. In this way, they create an emotional connection with visitors and make complex issues more accessible,

which, if presented exclusively through historical data and political information, would risk appearing more distant and impersonal. In this manner, the guide does not merely describe the border but contributes to creating an interpretative framework, highlighting meanings that go beyond the simple observation of the military infrastructures and physical barriers present in the area (Cohen, 1985).

The construction of this narrative, however, takes place within a location characterized by very strict rules and, for this reason, it must confront the particular operational conditions that characterize the DMZ. The constant presence of military authorities and the strict security measures continuously influence both the organization of tours and the work of guides, who must reconcile the provision of information with compliance with the regulations imposed by the military environment. This results in a constant tension between the desire to offer a meaningful experience and the necessity of respecting inviolable operational constraints. Military regulations also impose limited visiting times, forcing guides to condense decades of history into only a few hours spent within the border area (Best, 2012).

A further element of interest concerns the differences observed between licensed professional guides and guides without a specific certification. The former tend to place greater emphasis on the emotional, social, and cultural dimensions of Korean division, showing a stronger inclination to develop narratives based on empathy and the human consequences of the conflict. The latter, by contrast, appear more oriented towards the transmission of factual information and details concerning North Korea, using historical and political knowledge as a means of professional legitimization.

Despite these differences, both categories demonstrate a certain degree of caution when addressing particularly controversial political issues, favouring narratives capable of maintaining visitors' interest without generating tensions or interpretative doubts (Bessiere & Ahn, 2021).

In light of these considerations, it clearly emerges that the DMZ cannot be interpreted exclusively as a military border. The narratives constructed by tour guides contribute to attributing a plurality of meanings to the site that extend beyond its original function of territorial separation. Through stories of war, divided families, hopes for peace, and prospects of reunification, the border is transformed into a symbolic and cultural space, the understanding of which depends not only on what visitors observe, but also on what they are told during the visiting experience (*Ibidem*).

The border is once again transformed into a symbolic place and its understanding depends not only by what the visitors see, but also for the narrative built around the DMZ itself and its adjacent places.

4.5 The North Korean perspective on DMZ tourism

Although the tourism associated with the Korean Demilitarized Zone has been examined throughout this research primarily through the South Korean perspective, it is important to acknowledge that the North Korean side of the border has also developed specific forms of tourism and representations of the division of the peninsula. Prior to the closure of North Korea's borders in 2020 following the COVID-19 pandemic, state-organized itineraries allowed international visitors to access locations situated in close proximity to the DMZ, offering a perspective that differed significantly from that promoted by South Korea (Kim & Timothy, 2018; Hunter, 2013).

- *City of Kaesong*

Among the most significant destinations was the city of Kaesong, located only a few kilometres north of the Demilitarized Zone. Formerly the capital of the Goryeo Dynasty and currently recognized as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, Kaesong represented one of the principal destinations included in international tours to the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (UNESCO, 2013; Hunter, 2013). The city occupies a particularly important position within Korean history, as it preserves numerous archaeological sites, royal tombs, palaces and monuments dating back to the Goryeo period. For many international visitors, Kaesong offered a rare opportunity to engage with a historical narrative that preceded the division of the peninsula, emphasizing a shared Korean cultural heritage rather than contemporary political separation.

Unlike many attractions located on the South Korean side of the border, which focus on military observation points and the memory of the Korean War, tourism in Kaesong placed greater emphasis on Korean history, cultural heritage and national identity.

In this respect, the city functioned not only as a tourist destination but also as a symbolic reminder of a unified Korean past, contributing to broader narratives concerning national identity and eventual reunification (Kim & Timothy, 2018).

- *Panmunjom and the Joint Security Area (JSA)*

Another important destination was Panmunjom and the Joint Security Area (JSA), the common ground.

From the North Korean side, visitors were also able to observe the symbolic buildings associated with the division of the peninsula and learn about the events surrounding the signing of the 1953 Armistice Agreement.

However, the narrative presented to visitors differed considerably from that encountered in South Korean tours, in fact, South Korean interpretations generally emphasize division, international cooperation and efforts toward reconciliation, while North Korean narratives tend to focus on national sovereignty, resistance to foreign influence and the prospect of reunification under North Korean leadership.

Consequently, it is possible to recognize how the same physical space can acquire different meanings depending on the political and narrative framework through which it is presented to visitors (Kim & Timothy, 2018; Hunter, 2013).

- *The “Peace Village”*

A further symbolic element associated with the northern side of the DMZ is the village of *Kijŏng-dong*, often referred to as the “Peace Village.”

The village is visible from South Korean observation points and it occupies a prominent position within the tourist and media imagination surrounding the Demilitarized Zone. Established shortly after the Korean War, Kijŏng-dong was intended to demonstrate the prosperity and stability of life on the North Korean side of the border and has long played a role within the broader symbolic competition between the two Koreas. Its distinctive appearance, characterized by brightly coloured buildings and its strategic location within the DMZ, has contributed to its visibility among visitors touring the border area. Beyond the controversies that have accompanied its representation over time, Kijŏng-dong remains one of the most recognizable symbols of the border landscape and contributes to the construction of the DMZ as a highly symbolic as well as military space (Riotto, 2018).

Figure 27. North Korean propaganda Peace Village is seen from an South Korea's observation post inside the JSA during a media tour at the Joint Security Area (JSA) on the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) in the border village of Panmunjom in Paju, South Korea.



Source: Reuters (2023) / <https://www.reuters.com/pictures/peeking-into-north-korea-glimpses-daily-life-across-border-2025-10-14>

- ***The Korean Wall***

Some tour itineraries also included observation points from which North Korean guides presented the so-called “Korean Wall,” described as material evidence of the division of the peninsula. According to the narrative promoted by North Korean authorities, this structure consists of a concrete barrier allegedly constructed by South Korea, with the support of the United States, along significant sections of the border in order to permanently institutionalize the separation of the Korean nation. Within this interpretation, the wall is presented not merely as a defensive structure but also as a symbol of foreign intervention and of the continued division of Korea.

Although the existence of a continuous barrier extending along the entire border has been disputed by scholars and South Korean authorities, the site remains an important component of the tourism experience offered on the northern side of the DMZ. Rather than its physical reality, the significance of the “Korean Wall” lies in its symbolic value and in the role it plays within the broader political narrative communicated to visitors. The narratives surrounding the wall constitute a clear example of how tourism in the Demilitarized Zone extends beyond the observation of landscapes and historical sites, becoming a medium through which competing interpretations of history, memory and national identity are conveyed (Hunter, 2013; Kim & Timothy, 2018).

4.5.1 Limitations of the tourism analysis of North Korea

Despite the existence of several tourist attractions associated with the northern side of the DMZ, the analysis of tourism in North Korea remains subject to significant methodological limitations. Unlike South Korea, where tourism infrastructures are accessible and extensively documented, tourism activities in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea have historically been characterized by a high degree of state regulation and political control (Kim & Timothy, 2018; Hunter, 2013).

Prior to the closure of the country's borders in 2020, international tourism was permitted almost exclusively through state-approved tour operators and highly structured itineraries. Foreign visitors were generally required to travel in organized groups accompanied by official guides, with access to sites, transportation routes and schedules closely regulated by the authorities and, as a result, tourist experiences in North Korea were not only geographically controlled but also mediated through official narratives and state-sanctioned interpretations of history and national identity (Kim & Timothy, 2018; Hunter, 2013).

Nevertheless, tourism occupied an increasingly important role within North Korea's economic strategy during the first decade of Kim Jong Un's leadership. Between 2012 and 2020, tourism was progressively incorporated into broader economic development policies aimed at generating foreign currency revenues and attracting international visitors. Significant investments were directed towards the development of new tourism infrastructure, including the Masikryong Ski Resort, the Wonsan-Kalma Coastal Tourist Area, the Samjiyon Resort City and the redevelopment plans for the Mt. Kumgang Tourist Area (Makowsky, Town & Ragnone, 2023). In this context, tourism was not merely conceived as a tool of ideological representation but also as a potential source of economic development and international engagement.

This trajectory was abruptly interrupted by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In early 2020, North Korea implemented some of the strictest border control measures in the world, effectively suspending international tourism and severely restricting access to the country. As a consequence, many tourism projects experienced delays, reduced activity or complete suspension, while opportunities for field research and direct observation became extremely limited (Makowsky, Town & Ragnone, 2023).

Although commercial rail and air connections between Beijing and Pyongyang have gradually resumed in recent years, North Korea remains largely inaccessible to international tourism and the prospects for a full reopening of the sector continue to be uncertain (Makowsky, Town & Ragnone, 2023).

These circumstances have important implications for academic research. In particular, the scarcity of recent data, the restricted accessibility of tourist sites and the limited availability of independent sources make it considerably more difficult to evaluate contemporary tourism dynamics on the North Korean side of the DMZ.

Consequently, most recent studies continue to focus predominantly on the South Korean side of the border, where tourism activities remain accessible, observable and systematically documented.

However, the existence of destinations such as Kaesong, Panmunjom and Kijŏng-dong demonstrates that the North Korean side of the DMZ has also progressively acquired a touristic dimension. The Korean Demilitarized Zone can therefore be understood as a shared yet deeply asymmetrical tourist space, in which two distinct political systems produce different representations of the same border landscape (Kim & Timothy, 2018).

This asymmetry should not be interpreted as evidence of the absence of tourism on the North Korean side, but rather as a consequence of the different levels of accessibility and documentation available to researchers due to its current state of closure.

The analysis conducted throughout this chapter has demonstrated that the Korean Demilitarized Zone can no longer be interpreted exclusively as a military frontier. While it was built to manage the ongoing conflict between North and South Korea, it has grown into a unique tourist spot where history, geopolitics, and culture meet. Due to the development of museums, observatories, memorial parks, tunnels and guided tours, the DMZ has been completely changed, shifting from an off-limits space into a space where people can actually experience and engage with history first-hand.

CHAPTER 5

The DMZ as a laboratory of green economy and environmental diplomacy

The following chapter aims to analyse the Korean Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), focusing not on its traditional role as a geopolitical and military fault line, but rather as a strategic location central to sustainable development and ecological transition policies across the entire Korean Peninsula. Building directly on the theoretical foundations examined in the first chapter regarding the Green Economy and low-carbon growth models (Low Carbon, Green Growth), this discussion aims to demonstrate how an area originally defined by armed conflict can be transformed into a reservoir of natural capital and green jobs. We will therefore first analyse the biological and geographical factors that have enabled the spontaneous regeneration of this unintended ecological corridor; subsequently, the investigation will shift to the economic quantification of its ecosystem services and models of circular ecotourism; and finally, we will examine the role of UNESCO's international certifications in the border area.

5.1 The DMZ as an unspoilt ecosystem

The establishment of the Korean Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) in 1953, following the Panmunjom Armistice Agreement, generated one of the most remarkable ecological paradoxes of the modern era. Created as a highly militarized and controlled strip of land, the area experienced a complete suspension of human activities for more than seven decades. This prolonged isolation transformed a territorial belt originally devastated by military conflict into an unintended ecological corridor, where natural ecological succession processes have operated without any anthropogenic pressure or intervention (Kim, 1997; Park et al., 2021). Today, the territory presents itself as an open-air scientific laboratory, within which nature has independently restored ecological balances that have been permanently compromised elsewhere by the industrial and urban development of the Korean Peninsula (Park et al., 2021).

The factors that have enabled the conservation of nature in such a structurally untouched manner lie in the rigidity of military restrictions and the complete absence of external disturbances. The total prohibition of civilian access has fundamentally eliminated phenomena such as urbanization, deforestation, intensive agriculture, and poaching (Kim, 2013). Paradoxically, the presence of millions of landmines and extensive fortifications along

the Northern Limit Line (NLL)⁷⁰ and the Southern Limit Line (SLL)⁷¹ has acted as an impassable barrier, preventing human interference and functioning as a protective shield for natural habitats (Kim, 2013). Consequently, within this setting, ecosystem dynamics have developed according to exclusively biological rhythms, allowing the spontaneous regeneration of ancient forest soils and the restoration of complex trophic networks⁷² (Kim, 1997).

The visual and structural evidence of this environmental purity manifests itself differently across the three major geographical regions that extend across the peninsula from east to west. In the western section, the absence of land reclamation activities has preserved the estuaries of the Han⁷³ and Imjin Rivers⁷⁴, characterized by extensive coastal wetlands and salt marshes that continue to maintain their natural hydrological regime (Kim, 2013; National Atlas of Korea, 2020). Moving towards the central zone, this ecological integrity can be observed in the alluvial plains and inland basins, where former agricultural lands abandoned in 1953 have been entirely reclaimed by stable grasslands and flourishing secondary forests (Kim, 2013). Finally, the eastern sector exhibits the highest degree of forest integrity. It is no coincidence that the DMZ intersects the Baekdudaegan Mountain Range⁷⁵ in this area, a region characterized by rugged mountainous terrain and deep valleys where native forests have remained undisturbed for more than seventy years, ensuring the preservation of intact high-altitude forest habitats (National Atlas of Korea, 2020).

⁷⁰ The Northern Limit Line functions as the disputed maritime demarcation line in the Yellow Sea separating North and South Korea. Unilaterally drawn by the United Nations Command (UNC) in August 1953 following the Korean Armistice Agreement, it remains unrecognized by Pyongyang.

⁷¹ The Southern Limit Line (SLL) constitutes the southern boundary of the Korean Demilitarized Zone (DMZ). As the Northern Limit Line was established under the 1953 Korean Armistice Agreement. It runs parallel to, and exactly two kilometers south of, the Military Demarcation Line (MDL).

⁷² It refers to the interconnected feeding relationships between organisms within an ecosystem. They describe how energy and nutrients are transferred between producers, consumers and decomposers (different trophic levels), contributing to the stability of ecological communities.

⁷³ The principal river of South Korea and flows through Seoul before reaching the Yellow Sea.

⁷⁴ It originates in North Korea and crosses the Demilitarized Zone before joining the Han River near the western sector of the Korean Peninsula.

⁷⁵ The principal mountain spine of the Korean Peninsula, extending from Mount Baekdu on the border between North Korea and China to Mount Jiri in South Korea. Often described as the ecological and cultural backbone of Korea, it connects the peninsula's major mountain systems and hosts some of its most important forest ecosystems and biodiversity hotspots.

5.2 Protected area systems, flora Surveys and wildlife conservation

The extraordinary concentration of biodiversity recorded within the Demilitarized Zone and its immediate surroundings, the Civilian Control Zone (CCZ)⁷⁶, has made it necessary to establish a dense network of terrestrial and freshwater protected areas. Numerous scientific field surveys indicate that, although the DMZ covers less than 1% of the total surface area of the Korean Peninsula, it hosts approximately 20% of the country's total biological species and more than one-third of the species included in national Red Lists⁷⁷ (National Atlas of Korea, 2020; National Institute of Ecology, 2018).

In order to protect this biological continuity, South Korea has established national nature reserves and forest ecosystem conservation areas, concentrating conservation efforts particularly along river ecological corridors and the eastern mountain peaks, which are now considered biologically vital nodes (MDPI Land, 2024).

From a floristic perspective, the absence of chemical pollutants, the lack of invasive alien species introduced by humans, and the absence of forestry activities⁷⁸ have enabled the development of mature and stable plant communities. As a result, the vascular flora of the region includes more than 1,800 different species, among which numerous Korean endemic species and rare high-altitude plants have been recorded (Kim, 2013). In the eastern mountainous sections, vegetation is dominated by primary deciduous broadleaf and coniferous forests, where protected species such as *Megaleranthis saniculifolia* and *Hanabusaya asiatica*, a botanical genus strictly endemic to the Korean Peninsula, flourish (Kim, 2013; National Atlas of Korea, 2020). By contrast, the western wetlands display a rich riparian and halophytic vegetation, which plays a fundamental role in soil stabilization and in the natural filtration of the waters of transboundary river basins, thereby contributing to the maintenance of the entire ecosystem (Kim, 2013).

It is the fauna, however, that represents the most scientifically significant component of the DMZ ecosystem, serving as a biological indicator of the territory's ecological integrity. With

⁷⁶ The restricted area is located immediately south of the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), where civilian access and economic activities are regulated by military authorities for security reasons. The zone functions as a transitional buffer between the DMZ and the rest of South Korean territory.

⁷⁷ Conservation assessment systems that classify species according to their risk of extinction. They are widely used by national authorities and international organizations as tools for biodiversity monitoring and conservation planning.

⁷⁸ The human management and exploitation of forest resources, including logging, timber extraction, forest thinning, road construction, and other interventions aimed at the economic use of forest ecosystems.

the presence of large, medium, and small-sized mammals, the area constitutes a vital refuge for globally endangered species, such as the Long-tailed Goral (*Naemorhedus caudatus*), the Siberian Musk Deer (*Moschus moschiferus*), and the Eurasian Otter (*Lutra lutra*), which inhabits the unspoiled waterways of the central basin (National Institute of Ecology, 2018).

Ecological evidence further suggests that the DMZ functions as a transit corridor and potential habitat for apex predators that have largely disappeared from the rest of South Korea, such as the Leopard Cat (*Prionailurus bengalensis*). According to indirect tracking evidence, rare individuals of the Amur Leopard have also been reported within the area (Kim, 1997; Kim, 2013).

The faunal value of the region reaches its highest international significance in the field of avifauna, particularly because of the geopolitical and biological role played by wetlands and abandoned alluvial plains. The DMZ and the CCZ constitute one of the world's most important stopover and wintering sites along the East Asian–Australasian Flyway⁷⁹ (National Atlas of Korea, 2020). Every year, thousands of migratory waterbirds depend on these protected habitats. Among the most notable species are the Red-crowned Crane (*Grus japonensis*) and the White-naped Crane (*Grus vipio*), both classified as endangered species (Kim, 1997). Finally, the preservation of transboundary waterways guarantees the integrity of local ichthyofauna, characterized by a remarkably high level of endemism and the presence of rare freshwater fish species, which benefit from the complete prohibition of both commercial and recreational fishing activities (National Institute of Ecology, 2018).

⁷⁹ One of the world's major bird migration routes, extending from the Arctic and East Asia through South-East Asia to Australia and New Zealand; it depends on a chain of critical stopover and wintering wetlands.

Table 5.2 Quantitative Distribution of Animal Species in the Korean Demilitarized Zone (DMZ).

Taxonomic group	Species recorded in the DMZ	Protected species / red list species
Mammals	43	8
Birds	266	45
Amphibians and reptiles	34	5
Fish species	136	12
Vascular flora	1874	31
Invertebrates and other species	3511	22
Total	5928	123

Source: Author's own elaboration based on data provided by the National Institute of Ecology (NIE), the Google Arts & Culture project on species inhabiting the DMZ, and the Ministry of Environment of the Republic of Korea (2021–2023) / https://artsandculture.google.com/story/animals-living-in-the-dmz-national-institute-of-ecology/twVRv8x4gE_fWw?hl=en & <https://mcee.go.kr/eng/web/board/read.do.jsessionid>

5.3 The DMZ within the Framework of the Green Economy and the South Korean Green New Deal

The ecological analysis of the Demilitarized Zone cannot be separated from the broader macroeconomic context of South Korea, a country that has structured its long-term development vision around the paradigms of the Green Economy and low-carbon growth (Jones and Yoo, 2011). This orientation emerged through a series of national environmental and economic reforms, beginning with the Low Carbon, Green Growth Strategy launched in 2008 and later institutionalized through the Framework Act on Low Carbon, Green Growth. More recently, these objectives were reinforced through the Korean Green New Deal⁸⁰, introduced in 2020 as part of a broader strategy aimed at promoting sustainable economic recovery, green infrastructure, renewable energy development and environmental innovation. Within this policy framework, environmental protection has progressively shifted from being perceived as a constraint on development to being understood as a strategic economic asset and a key component of national competitiveness and, consequently, biodiversity

⁸⁰ Launched by the South Korean government in 2020 as one of the main pillars of the national post-pandemic recovery strategy. It aimed to accelerate the transition towards a low-carbon economy through investments in renewable energy, green infrastructure, digital technologies and the creation of environmentally sustainable employment opportunities.

conservation is no longer regarded as a cost to industrial development, but rather as a fundamental investment in the country's Natural Capital (Jones and Yoo, 2011; Kim, 2013).

Within this framework, the DMZ has been institutionally redefined by governmental agencies as an essential strategic area for positioning South Korea as a global leader in conservation innovation and sustainable ecological planning, transforming a symbol of military division into a laboratory for advanced green economy practices (Park et al., 2021).

While the Green Economy provides the institutional and economic framework for cooperation, nature itself has played an indirect yet fundamental role in shaping the conditions that make such cooperation possible. In areas characterized by limited human intervention, such as demilitarized zones and abandoned borderlands, ecological regeneration often occurs independently of political will. This process generates a significant accumulation of Natural Capital, understood as the stock of geology, soil, air, water and all living organisms that provide valuable ecosystem services.

This perspective encourages the adoption of an ecological approach in which nature is no longer viewed solely as a passive resource to be protected, but also as an active component of socio-political processes (Latour, 2004). The emergence of unique ecosystems within conflict zones can influence political perceptions, as these areas gradually come to be recognized as a form of shared natural heritage. Such heritage represents the biological and ecological capital upon which future Green Economy initiatives can be built.

In this sense, nature acts as a mediator by preserving spaces that remain largely untouched by industrial development and intensive human activity, thereby providing the ecological foundations for future forms of cooperation. The Korean DMZ represents a particularly significant example of this dynamic. By valuing the natural capital unintentionally preserved through decades of military division, the area can be reimagined not only as a borderland, but also as a potential hub for biodiversity conservation, ecological innovation and sustainable development.

Consequently, the DMZ can be interpreted as uniquely positioned to evolve from a site associated with military separation and what has often been defined as “negative peace⁸¹” into a space capable of generating new forms of cooperation through Green Economy

⁸¹ In peace studies, “negative peace” denotes the mere absence of direct violence or open hostilities, as opposed to “positive peace,” which entails cooperation, justice and integrated relations; the distinction is associated with Johan Galtung.

strategies. Its biodiversity, carbon sinks, wetlands and relatively undisturbed landscapes constitute the foundational assets upon which environmentally sustainable, economically viable and politically cooperative projects may be developed.

The integration of the DMZ into macroeconomic policies received a further and decisive boost with the launch of the Korean Green New Deal, a systemic plan aimed at promoting the ecological transition of infrastructure, the expansion of decentralized energy systems, and green digitalization (Republic of Korea, 2020). Within this programme, border territories and the Civilian Control Zone (CCZ) were incorporated into key projects designed to experiment with the coexistence of strict habitat preservation and the creation of new forms of ecological employment, the so-called Green Jobs⁸² (Korea Ministry of Environment, 2019; Republic of Korea, 2020). The active conservation of the DMZ is therefore linked to models of circular economy and regional sustainability, demonstrating how geographically marginalized areas, in this case as a consequence of a historical conflict, can in fact be transformed into centres of innovation for the bioeconomy and for the study of climate resilience (Lee and Mitchell, 2023; Stockholm Resilience Centre, 2021).

5.4 Economic valuation and the quantification of the DMZ's ecosystem services

The positioning of the Demilitarized Zone within the framework of the Green Economy requires a rigorous quantification of the ecosystem services provided by this biological corridor to the Korean Peninsula.

Within the literature of ecological economics, ecosystem services are not regarded as free and unlimited goods, but rather as flows of economic value generated by natural capital, which are essential for sustaining human activities and mitigating the negative externalities of industrial production (Jones and Yoo, 2011). As discussed in Chapter 1 through the concepts of Natural Capital Valuation and Green Interdependence, environmental resources can be interpreted not only as ecological assets but also as sources of measurable economic value capable of supporting long-term stability and sustainable development. The DMZ exhibits all four functional categories identified by the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment⁸³, namely provisioning services (freshwater resources), regulating services (climatic and hydrological

⁸² Occupations that contribute substantially to preserve or restore environmental quality and to promote socially sustainable economic development.

⁸³ A major UN-sponsored scientific assessment (2001–2005) of the consequences of ecosystem change for human well-being, which established the widely used fourfold classification of ecosystem services: provisioning, regulating, supporting and cultural.

regulation), supporting services (nutrient cycling and biodiversity conservation), and cultural services (recreational and educational value) (Kim, 2013).

The economic analysis primarily focuses on the hydrological and ecological regulation services provided by the western wetlands and the eastern highland forests. The extensive marshlands located within the Han and Imjin River basins function as natural green infrastructure, performing a macroeconomic role through water purification and flood storage (National Institute of Ecology, 2018). The monetization of this regulatory service, calculated by simulating the costs associated with the construction and maintenance of artificial water treatment facilities and flood-control dams, demonstrates that the conservation of the DMZ saves South Korea's public finances hundreds of millions of dollars annually (Jones and Yoo, 2011; Korea Ministry of Environment, 2019). Furthermore, the high level of forest biomass found in the eastern mountainous sector acts as a major carbon sink, fully aligning with national decarbonization objectives and with the carbon credit markets promoted under the Korean Green New Deal (Republic of Korea, 2020).

A further economic extension of the DMZ's natural capital is linked to biodiversity support services for agricultural production in the provinces adjacent to the border. The ecological stability of the protected corridor ensures the survival of large populations of pollinating insects and natural pest predators, which continuously move into the Civilian Control Zone (CCZ), where a significant proportion of South Korea's organic rice production is concentrated (Lee and Mitchell, 2023). It can therefore be inferred that this phenomenon generates a direct economic benefit for the primary sector by reducing farmers' dependence on chemical fertilizers and synthetic pesticides, in accordance with the principles of the circular economy (Jones and Yoo, 2011). In conclusion, the economic valuation of the DMZ's ecosystem services demonstrates that rigorous biological conservation should not be regarded as an obstacle to economic development, but rather as a fundamental pillar of efficiency and stability for the broader macroeconomy of the Korean Peninsula (Stockholm Resilience Centre, 2021).

5.5 Ecotourism models: natural capital and circular economy

The transition of the Demilitarized Zone from a predominantly military border line to a macroeconomic resource has encouraged the development of a model of ecological and cultural tourism that is strongly integrated within the paradigms of the Green Economy.

The development of ecotourism in this area is based on the principle of enhancing natural capital, including its economic value, by enabling public access to the territory while ensuring coexistence with the fragility of natural habitats and the strict military security protocols that characterize the region (Kim, 2013).

Ecotourism planning is concentrated primarily within the Civilian Control Zone (CCZ) and along the margins of the Southern Limit Line (SLL), positioning ecotourism as a regional circular economy framework capable of generating substantial income flows in areas historically disadvantaged by geopolitical isolation, while remaining directly connected to the protection of ecosystem services (Lee and Mitchell, 2023).

The most structured expression of this strategy can be observed in the institutional project known as the DMZ Peace Trails, a network of guided trekking routes located along the border area separating North and South Korea, which offer visitors the opportunity to experience the natural environment of the region, observe diverse wildlife species, and gain insight into the historical and military significance of one of the most heavily fortified borders in the world (Korea Ministry of Environment, 2019).

From a Green Economy perspective, this infrastructure has not required additional land consumption or investments in large-scale construction, as it relies exclusively on pre-existing military patrol roads, thereby minimizing the carbon footprint of the tourism sector (Lee and Mitchell, 2023). Trail management applies strict spatial planning criteria and fixed visitor quotas that are carefully staggered over time, demonstrating how limitations on access are essential to prevent negative externalities affecting wildlife, particularly during the sensitive nesting and migration seasons of protected bird species (Korea Ministry of Environment, 2019).

5.6 The Role of UNESCO

A diplomatic and institutional process aimed at obtaining UNESCO recognition for the Demilitarized Zone is currently underway, taking the form of a series of coordinated initiatives promoted by the South Korean government. These initiatives, which include the funding of governmental projects for the preparation of a transboundary property nomination dossier, the development of inter-Korean ecological governance models, and the establishment of the DMZ Peace Trails, constitute a strategic instrument of international validation for positioning the territory within the framework of the Green Economy. Within the context of South Korean macroeconomic policies, the pursuit of such supranational

protections does not respond exclusively to the requirements of biological conservation, but also functions as a genuine global certification of the peninsula's Natural Capital (Jones and Yoo, 2011; Park et al., 2021). This process of institutional accreditation reduces the geopolitical risk associated with the border area, transforming it into an economically attractive ecosystem for international investment funds dedicated to sustainability, climate finance, and ecological compensation projects (UNESCO, 2021).

The practical and partial application of this model can be observed in the designation of the Yeoncheon Imjin River Biosphere Reserve under UNESCO's Man and the Biosphere (MAB)⁸⁴ Programme (UNESCO, 2019), an international certification that covers a riverine ecological corridor directly connected to the DMZ and establishes rigorous guidelines for environmental governance (UNESCO, 2019). From an economic perspective, Biosphere Reserve status functions as an "ecological quality label" that increases the added value of local organic products and sustainable hospitality services in the border region, integrating them into responsible and highly profitable consumption networks (Korea Ministry of Environment, 2019; UNESCO, 2021).

At the same time, the aforementioned efforts to include the DMZ on the UNESCO World Heritage List respond to the objective of maximizing the value of the territorial brand on a global scale, transforming a symbol of geopolitical division into a reputational asset with significant economic potential (Park et al., 2021). Such formal inscription would strengthen the region's attractiveness for international scientific tourism and for academic research programmes funded by global institutions, generating a continuous flow of green investments independent of fluctuations in traditional industrial markets (UNESCO, 2021).

Ultimately, UNESCO certification represents the regulatory and reputational instrument necessary to unlock funding opportunities associated with a transboundary Green New Deal, providing a neutral and universally recognized technical platform for the future shared economic and biological management of the Korean border region by the two Koreas (Park et al., 2021; Republic of Korea, 2020).

5.7 Ecology and Green Diplomacy as drivers of transboundary cooperation and reunification

⁸⁴ An intergovernmental scientific programme launched by UNESCO in 1971 to improve the relationship between people and their environment, notably through the global network of Biosphere Reserves.

The convergence between biodiversity conservation within the Demilitarized Zone and the principles of the Green Economy finds its highest strategic expression in the development of so-called Green Diplomacy. In a geopolitical context constrained by longstanding military tensions, the shared protection of the environment becomes a neutral instrument of dialogue. In this regard, ecology provides a politically safe platform for engagement, capable of overcoming ideological barriers through the pursuit of shared technical objectives (Park et al., 2021).

Studies in ecological economics and international relations demonstrate that environmental vectors, such as transboundary river basins, atmospheric flows, and wildlife migration routes, structurally ignore political demarcation lines, thereby compelling neighbouring governments to engage in technical coordination and long-term joint investments (Stockholm Resilience Centre, 2021).

This dynamic closely reflects the concept of Green Interdependence introduced in Chapter 1, according to which shared ecosystems generate forms of mutual dependence that encourage cooperation and increase the economic and political costs associated with renewed conflict.

The theoretical potential of environmental peacebuilding is best demonstrated by the establishment of Transboundary Conservation Areas (TBCAs), often referred to as "Peace Parks." These areas serve as empirical evidence that ecological cooperation can stabilize political relations and generate sustainable economic value.

- The Cordillera del Condor (Peru and Ecuador): For decades, a disputed border territory led to recurring military conflicts between Peru and Ecuador. In 1998, the Presidential Act of Brasilia transformed the area into a Peace Park. This initiative moved the focus from territorial sovereignty to shared environmental management. By creating a joint ecological corridor, the two nations shifted their interactions from military skirmishes to coordinated biodiversity protection and ecotourism, demonstrating how nature can act as a "spatial buffer" that facilitates diplomatic rapprochement.
- The Great Limpopo Transfrontier Park (South Africa, Mozambique, and Zimbabwe): This is one of the most ambitious examples of environmental peacebuilding. By removing fences between national parks across three borders, the project created a massive ecological sanctuary. Beyond wildlife conservation, the Great Limpopo was

designed to stimulate a regional Green Economy through high-end ecotourism and sustainable resource management for local communities. It illustrates the concept of "Green Interdependence": the economic success of the park depends on the political stability and cooperation of all three participating nations.

- The Red Sea Marine Peace Park (Jordan and Israel): In the context of the 1994 Peace Treaty, Jordan and Israel established a joint initiative to protect the coral reefs of the Gulf of Aqaba. This project focused on shared scientific research and pollution control. It serves as a classic example of "Low-Politics" cooperation: even when high-level diplomatic tensions persist, the shared economic and ecological necessity of protecting the marine environment maintains a functional channel of communication between the two states.

These global precedents offer a vital lesson for the Korean peninsula: the transition from conflict to cooperation often begins with the recognition that ecological assets are indivisible. While the DMZ is unique in its level of militarization, these cases suggest that transforming a border from a "line of fire" into a "shared green corridor" is a viable pathway for regional stabilization and sustainable development.

Figure 28. Map of the Great Limpopo Transfrontier Park, that illustrates how environmental cooperation creates a continuous ecological corridor, effectively blurring national borders.



Source: Limpopo National Park (2026) / <https://parquelimpopo.gov.mz/history/>

In this respect, the Korean Peninsula presents many of the dynamics highlighted by these international precedents. The indivisibility of ecological resources compels states historically divided by strong political tensions to maintain functional channels of communication. Applied to the Korean Peninsula, the intrinsic fluidity of these environmental vectors transforms the DMZ from a rigid military barrier into a zone of forced ecological and economic interdependence, where joint management emerges as a structural necessity.

The operational core of this form of green cooperation lies in the implementation of ecological co-investment projects aimed at mitigating common environmental risks affecting the Korean Peninsula. The most concrete institutional proposals concern the extension of South Korea's Green New Deal funding towards transboundary reforestation programmes in North Korean mountain regions and the joint monitoring of the Imjin River basin (Korea Ministry of Environment, 2019; Stockholm Resilience Centre, 2021). From an economic perspective, such interventions do not merely constitute humanitarian assistance, but rather a strategy for preventing negative externalities. Indeed, the restoration of northern forest cover significantly reduces soil erosion and hydrogeological instability, which are responsible for

catastrophic downstream flooding in South Korean territory, thereby stabilizing ecosystem services across the entire region (Kim, 2013; Stockholm Resilience Centre, 2021).

Green Diplomacy thus transforms ecological security into a fundamental prerequisite for the overall macroeconomic stability of the peninsula as a whole (Jones and Yoo, 2011).

From this perspective, environmental cooperation may also generate what Chapter 1 identified as a Peace Dividend, namely the tangible economic and social benefits deriving from reduced tensions, increased cooperation, and the joint management of shared resources. Consequently, ecological initiatives contribute not only to environmental protection but also to the creation of conditions conducive to long-term regional stability.

At the supranational level, the principal ambition of this integrated approach lies in the formal transition of the DMZ towards the status of a *Transboundary Peace Park*, under the auspices of global organizations such as UNESCO and the IUCN⁸⁵ (UNESCO, 2021). Such a model envisages the institutional integration of existing biosphere reserves and ecological corridors on both sides of the border into a single protected macro-entity, managed by permanent bilateral coordination commissions composed of scientists and policy-makers from Seoul and Pyongyang (Asia-Pacific Journal, 2023; UNESCO, 2021).

The establishment of a transboundary peace park would not only provide legal protection for an irreplaceable biological heritage, but would also generate a permanent diplomatic infrastructure, positioning sustainability and green growth as fundamental pillars and economic catalysts for the future process of reconciliation and reunification on the Korean Peninsula (Park et al., 2021; Republic of Korea, 2020).

In conclusion, the analysis conducted throughout this chapter demonstrates that the Korean Demilitarized Zone represents a unique global case study in which the principles of the Green Economy find practical and multisectoral application within a highly complex post-conflict environment. The unintended suspension of human activity that began in 1953 preserved an invaluable biological heritage which, within the framework of the Korean Green New Deal, is no longer perceived as a geographical limitation to development but has instead become fully integrated as a fundamental pillar of national natural capital.

The transition towards sustainable ecotourism models and the progressive international certification of riverine and mountain biological reserves under the auspices of UNESCO demonstrate the feasibility of a circular economy capable of generating ecological

⁸⁵ Acronym of the International Union for Conservation of Nature, a global conservation authority, known in particular for its Red List of Threatened Species.

employment (Green Jobs) for border communities, proving that rigorous habitat conservation can coexist with regional macroeconomic stability.

Finally, the prospect of Green Diplomacy offers a concrete pathway beyond the stalemates of traditional diplomacy, positioning hydrological security, reforestation, and scientific cooperation as non-negotiable priorities detached from ideological considerations. Ecology thus ceases to be merely a scientific discipline and becomes the most solid and neutral catalyst for the construction of mutual trust and transboundary peace.

The DMZ embodies the potential to demonstrate how environmental sustainability and the Green Economy can transform the last great frontier of the Cold War into a biological and economic bridge towards the reunification of the Korean Peninsula.

Figure 29. *Border fence within the Korean Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), enhanced by artistic installations depicting local wildlife.*



Source: Stockholm Resilience Centre (2026) / <https://www.stockholmresilience.org/research/research-stories/2026-04-15-from-demilitarized-zone-to-ecological-peace-new-visions-for-koreas-future.html>

5.7.1 Challenges and limitations of environmental cooperation

Despite the considerable economic, diplomatic and also ecological potential discussed so far, the transformation of the Korean Demilitarized Zone into a fully integrated model of environmental cooperation has not yet been realized. This apparent contradiction raises an important question faced by the present analysis. If environmental cooperation represents one

of the most promising avenues for dialogue on the Korean Peninsula, why have many of the proposed initiatives remained largely unimplemented?

The answer is to be found in the very geopolitical context that simultaneously makes environmental cooperation both necessary and difficult. In fact, while the ecological continuity of the DMZ offers an exceptional opportunity for joint conservation and peacebuilding initiatives, the peninsula remains characterized by unresolved political tensions and, above all, by the absence of a formal peace treaty. Consequently, the same border that possesses the potential to become a space of cooperation and economic growth continues to function primarily as a security frontier, within this context.

Despite the considerable potential of environmental cooperation on the Korean Peninsula, the practical implementation of Green Diplomacy initiatives remains subject to a number of significant limitations. Although international organizations, governmental agencies and scholars have increasingly highlighted the ecological value of the Demilitarized Zone and its potential contribution to peacebuilding processes, many proposed projects remain largely aspirational and dependent on broader political developments (UNESCO Korean National Commission, 2021; Stockholm Resilience Centre, 2021).

The very first challenge concerns the highly militarized nature of the border itself. While the ecological integrity of the DMZ is largely the result of restricted human access and decades of limited development, these same conditions simultaneously constrain scientific research, environmental monitoring and the implementation of joint conservation initiatives. The transformation of the DMZ into a space of ecological cooperation requires a level of institutional coordination that remains difficult to achieve within a context still characterized by security concerns and political uncertainty (Park et al., 2021).

In addition, although several proposals have advocated the creation of transboundary conservation areas, biosphere reserves and ecological corridors extending across the peninsula, their realization continues to depend on stable inter-Korean relations and long-term political commitment (UNESCO Korean National Commission, 2021). In this regard, the contrast between the ecological continuity of natural systems and the political fragmentation of the peninsula remains particularly evident. While rivers, wildlife migration routes and ecological processes transcend political borders, their effective management

requires forms of cooperation that have often proven difficult to sustain over time (Stockholm Resilience Centre, 2021).

Additional challenges emerge from the asymmetrical political and economic conditions that characterize the two Koreas. While South Korea has progressively integrated environmental sustainability into its national development strategies through initiatives such as the Green New Deal and broader Green Growth policies (Jones and Yoo, 2011; Republic of Korea, 2020), the implementation of large-scale transboundary projects requires cooperation mechanisms that extend beyond unilateral planning. Consequently, the transition from environmental potential to environmental governance remains one of the principal obstacles to the development of long-term ecological peacebuilding initiatives.

Furthermore, a significant and often insurmountable institutional barrier to the practical operationalization of a "Green SEZ" or any large-scale environmental governance is represented by the stringent international sanctions regime imposed on North Korea.

After its nuclear and ballistic missile tests, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) has adopted a series of rigorous resolutions, most notably Resolutions 2270, 2321, and 2375⁸⁶, which heavily restrict financial transactions, joint economic ventures and any type of transfers of machinery and technologies to Pyongyang (UNSC, 2017; Worden, 2020).

Since many modern ecological initiatives, such as renewable energy grids, waste management systems, and advanced environmental monitoring tools, rely on dual-use technologies or cross-border capital flows, they inevitably clash with current international legal constraints. As a consequence, the geopolitical stalemate does not merely prevent political consensus, but it legally paralyzes the infrastructural deployment required for comprehensive green interdependence (Habib, 2021).

To navigate this restrictive landscape, environmental peacebuilding strategies must adopt highly specialized and de-politicized frameworks. By reframing environmental degradation, such as North Korea's severe deforestation, soil erosion, and transboundary flooding, as a direct threat to human security and climate vulnerability, specific conservation projects can be legally decoupled from commercial ventures (Snyder & Shin, 2020). Moreover, shifting the cooperative paradigm from a strictly bilateral axis (Seoul-Pyongyang) to a multilateral

⁸⁶ These specific UNSC resolutions, adopted between 2016 and 2017 in response to the DPRK's nuclear and ballistic missile tests, marked a shift toward comprehensive sectoral sanctions. Notably, Resolution 2375 (2017) explicitly prohibits the opening and maintenance of all joint ventures or cooperative entities with DPRK individuals or entities, effectively halting bilateral economic cooperation.

one, involving third-party international actors such as the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) or the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), could provide the necessary transparency to reassure the international community. In the short term, this enables a focus on "low-hanging fruit" initiatives, such as science diplomacy, joint academic data-sharing on biodiversity, and capacity-building, which do not violate sanctions but effectively lay the groundwork for future structural governance (Environmental Peacebuilding Association, 2022).

Nevertheless, these limitations should not be interpreted as evidence of the failure of environmental cooperation. Rather, they demonstrate the complexity of applying environmental peacebuilding strategies within one of the world's most politically sensitive border regions. Precisely because ecological processes transcend political boundaries, environmental cooperation continues to represent one of the most promising and politically neutral avenues through which future forms of dialogue and trust-building may emerge on the Korean Peninsula.

Conclusion

The armistice signed on 27 July 1953 brought the fighting on the Korean peninsula to an end without ending the war as such, it was followed by no peace treaty⁸⁷, and the ceasefire line that was meant to be provisional has, over the course of more than seven decades, consolidated into the Korean Demilitarized Zone, which today stands as one of the most heavily fortified borders in the world⁸⁸ and, at the same time, one of the last material remnants of the Cold War still in existence. The question that has guided this thesis was whether such a border can adequately be understood as a border in the conventional sense of the term, that is, as a line that divides, or whether this understanding is in fact too simplistic and incomplete to describe the border between the two Koreas. The analysis developed in the preceding chapters indicates that the conventional reading proves limiting.

The DMZ cannot be reduced to a mere line of separation, rather, it is to be understood as a layered, multidimensional border space in which historical, diplomatic, symbolic, touristic, and ecological dimensions coexist and interact, and whose meaning cannot be captured through the language of military demarcation alone.

This conclusion does not rest on any single dimension of the DMZ, but on the way in which its various dimensions converge. Established as a temporary military buffer zone, the DMZ has in fact acquired functions and meanings that, at the moment of its creation, could not have been foreseen. The historical reconstruction carried out in this thesis has shown that the zone is the sedimented product of a long sequence, colonial rule, division, war, and an armistice never resolved, rather than a fixed or self-explanatory object. What was created in order to freeze a conflict has become a space continually reproduced through political, social, and ecological processes, and it is this productive and evolving character that the analysis has sought to bring into focus. Each of the dimensions examined, in turn, reinforces the same conclusion, that the meaning of the DMZ exceeds, at every level, the function for which it was originally created.

⁸⁷ The Korean Armistice Agreement was signed at Panmunjom on 27 July 1953, but no peace treaty has since been concluded. For the historical background, see Cumings (2010) and Seth (2023).

⁸⁸ On the militarisation and fortification of the border, see BBC News (2019) and The Guardian (2023).

The diplomatic and symbolic dimension offers the clearest illustration of the incompleteness of reading the DMZ as a "mere border," for it functions simultaneously as a site of confrontation and as a stage for reconciliation.

The very strip of land that houses loudspeakers, propaganda, and the apparatus of psychological warfare has also served as the setting for inter-Korean summits, foremost among them the 2018 Panmunjom summit⁸⁹, in which the border itself became the medium through which the relationship between the two Koreas was enacted and projected to a global audience. The handshake over the Military Demarcation Line, the two leaders' deliberate crossing and re-crossing of the line, and the carefully staged choreography of the encounter were not incidental to the diplomacy but constitutive of it, the border was made to signify reconciliation just as visibly as it ordinarily and simultaneously signifies division. This capacity of a single line to separate and at the same time connect, to enact antagonism while simulating its provisional suspension, is structurally incompatible with the conventional notion of a frontier, and it is precisely this performative dimension that a strictly military reading cannot contain.

A further dimension emerges when the DMZ is examined as a touristic and memorial landscape. In particular, the analysis of dark tourism, of the principal sites on the southern side of the border, including the Imjingak complex, the Third Infiltration Tunnel, the Dora Observatory, and Dorasan Station. and of the practices of memorialization, commodification, and consumption on the part of visitors to the border and its memorial sites has shown that the zone has become an object of representation and of economic value, through which a divided nation narrates itself to its own citizens and to the world. The border, in this sense, is not only guarded but also visited, photographed, interpreted by guides, and sold as a product, so that the trauma of division is rendered legible and, to a certain extent, consumable as heritage. The marked asymmetry between the southern side, accessible and densely documented, and the northern side, controlled and, for now, inaccessible, has confirmed once again that the same border landscape produces divergent meanings depending on the political system that frames it. Here the DMZ appears as a cultural and commercial resource, as a dimension in its own right that once again exceeds its military definition and that already demonstrates, albeit at an early stage, the zone's capacity to generate economic value

⁸⁹ On the 2018 inter-Korean summit and its symbolic staging, see the Panmunjom Declaration (Republic of Korea & Democratic People's Republic of Korea, 2018); BBC News (2018); Watanabe (2018); and Winstanley-Chesters (2019a).

precisely on the basis of its very condition as a border.

It is, however, the ecological and economic dimension that represents one of the most innovative aspects of the DMZ's evolution, since it allows us to observe how a territory born of conflict can be progressively reinterpreted as an environmental resource and an opportunity for development. The findings of this research indicate that the DMZ should be understood not only as a diplomatic stage and a tourist landscape but, above all, as a reserve of natural capital and as a potential laboratory for the green economy and for ecotourism.

The paradox at the heart of this reading is that a territory sealed off for the purposes of division and deterrence has become, precisely by virtue of that closure, one of the most important biodiversity refuges in East Asia, a veritable involuntary ecological corridor in which equilibria long lost elsewhere on the peninsula have been preserved, and which today hosts numerous rare and endangered species⁹⁰.

The analysis has translated this paradox into economic and political terms by considering the economic valuation of the zone's ecosystem services,⁹¹ which reframes conservation not as a cost but as the protection of a measurable value. It highlights models of circular ecotourism such as the DMZ Peace Trails, which aim to convert the zone's ecological singularity into sustainable local development, the role of international environmental recognition, exemplified by its designation as a biosphere reserve under the UNESCO Man and the Biosphere programme⁹² and the prospect of green diplomacy, in which shared environmental management can serve as a "low-politics" channel of cooperation precisely when "high-politics" negotiation is deadlocked⁹³. Read in this light, the DMZ can be reframed from a line of confrontation into a shared ecological corridor, capable of generating not only conservation value but also a tangible peace dividend for territories long penalised by their proximity to the border.

The originality of the present research lies precisely in this reframing.

The existing literature on the DMZ is dominated by two now well-established perspectives, a strategic and military reading, centred on security and deterrence, and a diplomatic reading,

⁹⁰ On the biodiversity of the DMZ and the rare and endangered species it shelters, see Kim (1997); National Institute of Ecology (2018); and Park et al. (2021).

⁹¹ On the economic valuation of the zone's ecosystem services, see Choi (2013).

⁹² On the biosphere-reserve designation, see UNESCO (2019); see also UNESCO Korean National Commission (2021). The designation concerns the South-Korean side (the Yeoncheon Imjin River Biosphere Reserve); the earlier transboundary proposal was not approved.

⁹³ On environmental cooperation as a "low-politics" channel, see Conca and Dabelko (2002); Conca and Wallace (2009); and Ide (2019).

centred on inter-Korean negotiation and great-power politics. Both perspectives are nonetheless necessary, and this study has naturally drawn on each of them, yet both tend to treat the ecological and economic value of the zone as marginal, when it is in fact an essential and innovative element. By placing that value at the centre of the analysis, and reading it through the combined frameworks of ecological economics, environmental peacebuilding, and the green economy⁹⁴, this thesis advances a perspective that has so far received relatively limited attention in the literature, seeking to make a threefold contribution. It is, first, a contribution of reframing, in that it shifts the analytical question from how the border is defended or negotiated to how much the border is worth, in ecological and economic terms, and to what forms of cooperation that value might give rise in the future, given the necessary conditions. Second, it constitutes a work of interdisciplinary synthesis, deliberately bringing into dialogue different fields, in particular political geography and conservation science, memory studies and dark tourism, ecological economics, diplomacy, and the green economy, in order to read a single object through an integrated, multidimensional frame. Finally, the research is conducted in the field, on the southern side of the border, making it possible to test the theoretical argument against the concrete reality of the sites and of the ways in which they are presented to those who visit them. Taken together, these elements support the central thesis that the DMZ can be understood as a strategic resource for the sustainable development and ecological transition of the peninsula, rather than as a mere residue of conflict.

It must be stressed, however, that the potential of the Demilitarized Zone that has emerged in the course of this research does not yet represent an existing reality, but rather a still-latent one. The conflict from which the DMZ originated has never been formally resolved, and the armistice has never become a peace treaty. This means that, beneath the apparent stability of the border, an unresolved antagonism and a profound diplomatic and political distance persist. The regime of international sanctions imposed on North Korea is not a marginal obstacle but a structural one, since it prohibits precisely those forms of bilateral economic cooperation on which any joint valorisation of the zone would depend⁹⁵. The natural capital accumulated within the DMZ is therefore, for the time being, a heritage shared in principle but inaccessible in practice. The transformation of the zone from a space of negative peace.

⁹⁴ The analysis draws on ecological economics (Daly, 1996; Pearce & Turner, 1990), environmental peacebuilding (Conca & Dabelko, 2002; Ide, 2019) and the green economy (UNEP, 2011).

⁹⁵ On the sanctions regime, see United Nations Security Council (2017); on its economic and environmental implications, see Habib (2021) and Babson (2022).

understood as the mere absence of open hostilities, into a space of positive peace⁹⁶, characterised by real, concrete cooperation and shared management, cannot be achieved through the ecological vision alone; it requires a degree of political détente that does not currently exist. The asymmetry between the two Koreas, in access, in transparency, in willingness to cooperate, further complicates any bilateral project, and the international precedents of cross-border cooperation examined in this thesis have succeeded only where the political will to cooperate has been present and concrete.

And yet the value of identifying this opportunity does not depend on its immediate realisation, and the implications of the perspective developed here extend well beyond the Korean case. The relationship that the DMZ exemplifies, between a militarised line of division, the involuntary ecological regeneration it produces, and the possibility of converting that regeneration into a basis for cooperation, is not unique. The way in which prolonged human exclusion turns a frontier into a refuge recurs in contexts other than the Korean DMZ. The most fully developed parallel, in particular, is that with the European Green Belt, a continuous corridor of habitat that emerged along the route of the former Iron Curtain. Launched as a coordinated initiative in 2003 under the auspices of the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), it today extends for some twelve thousand kilometres across more than twenty states⁹⁷ and has been deliberately transformed, through cross-border conservation, from the Cold War⁹⁸ "death strip" into a transnational ecological network and a living monument to the overcoming of division, to the point that its natural values have been described as among the few positive legacies of the Cold War-. Another case is the United Nations buffer zone that has divided Cyprus since 1974, which offers an even closer structural analogy, occupying roughly three per cent of the island and sealed off by the conflict, it is frequently compared to the Korean DMZ and has likewise become an involuntary biodiversity refuge, a 2007 survey supported by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) documented hundreds of plant species and dozens of birds and

⁹⁶ The distinction between "negative" and "positive" peace follows Galtung.

⁹⁷ The European Green Belt emerged from regional conservation efforts and was launched as a coordinated initiative in 2003, with the IUCN acting as overall coordinator; it now forms an ecological corridor of roughly 12,500 km running through 24 countries along the former Iron Curtain. See Havlick and Pieck (2019); European Green Belt Initiative (n.d.).

⁹⁸ Conservation actors frame the Green Belt as a rare positive outcome of the Cold War: the European Green Belt Initiative describes it as a living memorial to the peaceful overcoming of the Iron Curtain, while the NGO BUND calls it "the only positive symbol of the Iron Curtain" (Geidezis, BUND, quoted in The Organization for World Peace, 2019). See also Havlick and Pieck (2019).

mammals within it⁹⁹, while bi-communal environmental cooperation across the line has at times provided a rare channel of contact between the two communities, leading some observers to read the zone as a potential laboratory for ecological planning and green growth. The transboundary peace parks discussed earlier in this thesis likewise demonstrate, in turn, that such shared ecological features can be deliberately converted into instruments of reconciliation wherever the political will to do so exists¹⁰⁰. The Korean DMZ thus belongs to a broader, recurring pattern, in which lines drawn to divide acquire, over time, an ecological value that can be reframed as a foundation for shared management.

This question, moreover, is no longer confined to the Korean peninsula; indeed, it has taken on a renewed and urgent topicality. Between late 2025 and 2026, the proposals advanced in the search for an end to the war in Ukraine have repeatedly included the establishment of demilitarized or buffer zones along the line of contact in the east of the country and, a point of particular significance for the argumentative aim of this research, the hypothesis that such a zone might be conceived not as a mere security barrier but as a monitored "free economic zone," oriented towards reconstruction and development. These proposals nonetheless remain contested, their terms are sharply debated, and their outcome remains uncertain. The buffer zones of the present are, first and foremost, instruments of separation, and it would be difficult to present them as nascent peace parks, nevertheless, their very emergence indicates that the question at the heart of this study, namely, whether a line drawn to divide can be induced to generate shared value as well, is not merely a peculiarity of the Korean peninsula but also a problem that is becoming increasingly relevant in contemporary international politics.

The Korean DMZ, as the oldest and most studied of these spaces, offers both a cautionary lesson and a constructive one: cautionary, in that it demonstrates that ecological value is not sufficient to overcome an unresolved conflict, and constructive, in that it shows how a territory born of division can accumulate over time resources, meanings, and opportunities that, given the necessary political conditions, could be transformed into instruments of cooperation.

⁹⁹ The first biodiversity survey of the UN Buffer Zone, funded by the United Nations Development Programme in 2007 and carried out by a bi-communal team of experts, documented 358 plant species, more than 100 birds and 18 mammals within the zone (Gücel et al., 2008).

¹⁰⁰ On transboundary peace parks and the role of protected areas in conflict resolution, see Dudley et al. (2002); see also Conca and Dabelko (2002).

In conclusion, what remains of an unfinished war is, in the most immediate sense, a peninsula divided in two by a militarised border now more than seventy years old. This thesis has sought, however, to demonstrate that this is only the most superficial description. That same line is in fact a Demilitarized Zone that is not only a border but many things at once. Sedimented within the same territory are a diplomatic stage, a landscape of memory and tourism, and, most significant of all, beyond the border itself, an involuntary ecological reserve of considerable environmental and economic value. The Korean Demilitarized Zone is not, in this sense, a mere residue of the Cold War, but a space whose meaning is still in the making, and whose ecological and economic value, however constrained at present by the very conflict that generated it, deserves to be placed at the centre, and not at the margins, of the way in which this border is understood. Whether the opportunity identified here will ultimately be realised is a question that belongs to the future of the two Koreas, or rather of the Korean peninsula as a whole. What this thesis has sought to establish is that the potential exists, that it is rooted in the material reality of the territory, and that recognising it is itself a necessary first step.

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