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A Visit to Panmunjom

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Dear Peter,

I took a day off my Korean-language study routine a few weeks ago and signed up for a trip with one of the local tour companies. It was my first indulgence in tourism since I've been here, and I'm glad I took the time off for some fun and relaxation.

Korea must be the only country in the world where for just $25 you can tour a war zone. Every weekday at 9:40 a bus leaves from the downtown tourist hotels and drives north along the Munsan Corridor (the classic invasion route to Seoul), about 29 miles, to Panmunjom, often called "truce village," which is in the middle of the Demilitarized Zone.

"You are on the spot!" boasts one brochure. "This is the one place in the world where you can freely cross over to the communist-held area and return just as freely. Tourists are permitted to take pictures." The photo for this caption, however, was recently bumped in a new brochure for a shot of "The Third Tunnel of Aggression," which has been added to the itinerary. The picture shows two South Korean soldiers in the tunnel, which runs under the DMZ from North Korea, posing as though sweeping the tunnel with metal detectors, while a couple of their buddies point rifles into the camera. Pretty scary. Other tour attractions include "Freedom Bridge," "The Bridge of No Return," and, of course, "Freedom House."

A trip to Panmunjom is supposed to be one of the "must see" attractions in South Korea. For many visitors it is something of a cathartic experience, and the local English newspapers never tire of printing visitors' reflections on the treachery of North Korea, which they seem to discover for the first time at Panmunjom. Even Secretary of State Shultz, over a year ago, came back impressed that "They are not playing games up there." (He used this same expression in November, during President Reagan's visit, when answering a journalist's question about why dissidents were arrested prior to the visit.)

I joined the tour on what turned out to be the coldest day of the year. I and the bus full of Japanese and mostly American tourists repeatedly wiped frost from the windows to get a better view of the city ramparts--not the

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ancient ones, many of which are still in place, but the modern ones. The way into Seoul is blocked by at least five or six huge anti-tank installations, consisting mainly of long, tall, concrete embankments that tanks cannot drive over, running between the mountains on either side of the road. Bridge-like structures that span the road itself, sometimes two in succession, are actually large chunks of concrete ready to be detonated into the roadway if tanks should approach. On the north side of the walls are fields of stout concrete piers, about a meter across, set apart so that any vehicle trying to go across will become lodged between them. This was the route that North Korean troops followed in 1950, which took them to Seoul in three days of fighting.

The trip up includes two mandatory stops at war memorials--obelisks with bigger-than-life soldiers cast in full combat gear at the base, charging, throwing grenades, firing pistols and rifles, and standing ready for hand-to-hand combat. Farther north, the bus passes a military check point south of the Imjin River, just a few miles from the DMZ itself. To travel north of this point a special pass is required. The river is spanned by a single-lane rickety bridge (Freedom Bridge, naturally) about 50 meters long. Beside it are the crumbling concrete pylons of an older bridge, probably destroyed in the war. Those old pylons were the first relics of the Korean War I have seen here. At either end of the bridge military guards telephone back and forth to each other to prevent the trickle of traffic in opposite directions from starting out while the bridge is being used.

The guards control the flow of traffic in and out of what is really a historical artifact, a little bit of Korea frozen in time for the past thirty years by a war that never ended. Seoul outstripped the period years ago. Older residents of Seoul talk of a time when the US military base was about the only show in town. The rest of the largely-destroyed city, it seemed, lived off the witting or unwitting largesse of Uncle Sam. These days, though, the base is dwarfed by the incredible bustle of the city that has grown up around it. The "NOT FOR SALE" USDA butter and California jug wine that show up in the black market are now a minor footnote to Korea's industrial dynamism.

But thirty miles to the north it is very different. On July 27, 1953, the American generals commanding United Nations forces and the generals commanding Chinese and North Korean forces agreed to stop shooting at each other. (A South Korean signature on the armistice agreement is notably absent.) They drove markers into the ground and pulled their forces back two kilometers on either side of the line of ground contact. And there they have sat. The four kilometer-wide band runs 151 miles across the penninsula, fenced off on both sides. The South has posted guard towers about every one hundred meters, and has laid out a mine field as well.

Journalists often describe the demilitarized zone as a "barren strip of land." Actually, nothing could be further from the truth. Spared from the ravages of development and the hunter's gun, the overgrown zone has become something of a wildlife preserve. On the trip in and out of Panmunjom we spotted at least a dozen Manchurian cranes, thought to be extinct until they made their home in the DMZ and multiplied.

The tour first stopped at an American army camp on the southern boundary of the zone, outside the gate that leads into Panmunjom. There a beefy, American PFC from Tennessee gave us a briefing, delivered expressionless in an agressively loud military monotone. The briefing began with a warning that we enter the DMZ at our own risk and that no one would take responsibility for what the North Koreans might do to us. He then proceeded to give us the American military version of Korean history, full of insight about the two "countries" on the Korean penninsula and the "boundary" that runs between them. (It is, of course, neither American nor South Korean government policy that there are two countries here or that the Military Demarcation Line constitutes an international boundary.)

Lunch at the camp officer's club--consisting of celery soup, overcooked roast beef, instant mash potatoes, and boiled coffee--seemed designed to make us feel that we had indeed left Korea, at least the modern Korea I had come to know. The closer we came to the focal point of Korea's most vexing problem--symbolized by Panmunjom--the more America seemed to dominate the scene.

I had heard Panmunjom described as a "village" so many times that I was expecting to see at least the remains of a farming settlement. I was disappointed. Panmunjom is a circle of land technically called the Joint Security Area. The site, straddling the Military Demarcation Line, was the place where the Korean armistice was negotiated, although it was signed by high ranking generals who stayed at a safe distance.

A series of low, single-story buildings straddle the Line in the center of the Joint Security Area. There American and North Korean soldiers meet almost daily to exchange information and take care of the work-a-day problems of maintaining the area. They also pass on messages from their political superiors. The full-scale Military Armistice Commission also meets there periodically for a ritualized exchange of abuse and accusations about violations of the Armistice.

Aside from these low, tacked-together buildings, South Korea has erected "Freedom House" while North Korea has built "Panmun Pavillion" as the architectural expressions of their respective political wills. Small buildings housing guard posts also dot the area.

Prior to 1976, guards from each side freely roamed the area, setting up guard posts on both sides of the Demarcation Line. But in 1976 a mob of North Koreans attacked and murdered with axes two Americans in the U.N. command who were leading a party to trim a tree in the southern half of the Area. That put an end to that. Now the Demarcation Line is clearly marked by a concrete divider and even microphone cords on the conference table are clearly laid out over the dividing mark.

Panmunjom is an island 800 meters wide on the knob of a hill in a sea of grass and scrub. The American PFC rode with us through the gate into the DMZ, and across the two kilometers of open land to Panmunjom. The South Korean government has permitted, largely for propaganda purposes, one farming village to remain in the zone. The villagers are heavily restricted in their movements (they are surrounded by mine fields) but they have been at

least partially compensated by the government, which built them new homes at public expense. The village also boasts a huge flagpole that flies a gigantic Republic of Korea flag. The North, for their part, erected their own propaganda village which is only a bit more ridiculous since no one actually lives there. It does, however, have an even taller flag pole, with an even more monstrous North Korean flag.

Once inside the Joint Security Area our party was surrounded by chunky American, and a few South Korean, guards who met the special size and weight requirements for duty there. They kept us from straying off the tour path or touching any North Korean property. Our guide provided a running commentary of snide remarks about North Korean attempts to put a larger flag on the conference table, about the pitifully narrow building behind the impressive facade of the North Korean pavilion, and about North Korean efforts to track our movements carefully, following us with binoculars after we entered the area. Meanwhile, an American with a telephone sat on the upper balcony of "Freedom House" watching the North Koreans through a pair of field glasses as they watched us. (I wondered if the North Korean guards were telling each other that we were being surrounded by guards to prevent defection to the North.)

The tour wound up with a descent to the "Third Tunnel of Agression," though not before the South Korean military treated us to a movie about how the tunnel was discovered. For that we exited the DMZ and were led by the South Korean Army. The tunnel, which the North had secretly blasted out of rock 70 meters below the DMZ, was discovered in 1979. South Korea says it is large enough to drive a jeep through and was intended to serve as a secret invasion route. We trudged down the steep intercept tunnel which the South Koreans had dug, and walked for several dozen meters toward the north, past the jagged rocks of the tunnel, which were dripping with water. There, the South has sealed the tunnel with an apparently permanent concrete plug that has a hole in the middle. A South Korean guard sits there with a machine gun pointed north through the hole, the other side lit by bright flood lights. (The only thing I could not figure out was how they changed the light bulbs.)

The tour, unfortunately, did not prompt in me any fresh revelations about North Korean treachery. If anything, it had a comic movie-set-like character, with the heavy dose of propaganda making a very serious problem look ridiculous.

On the way home, my thoughts dwelled on the only thing I had not really anticipated on the tour--the dominance of American presence at Panmunjom. And I wondered how it must look from North Korea. Panmunjom, after all, is the only place where North Koreans can have direct contact with South Korea. And what do they see? Americans in charge. Nearly every day they meet with Americans and work together to keep Panmunjom on stage--one of the longest-running scripted and controlled political confrontations around.

Of course there are specific historical reasons why Americans are at Panmunjom. It is all spelled out in the armistice agreement. North Korea should understand that well. Yet in other areas that most nations consider crucial for their sovereignty, Americans are again out front in Korea.

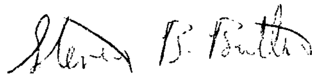
The American commanding general in Korea has direct command over most South Korean forces. When Chun Doo Hwan staged his coup in 1979, he actually pulled troops off the Demilitarized Zone, troops that were formally under American control. Even many South Koreans concluded that the American government must have endorsed the coup and the general who led it, and that even now the United States can easily manupulate the Seoul government.

Symbols are not everything. But they do count for something. And there is no denying that for symbols of sovereignty, North Korea has a leg up on the South. The frightening possibility, though, is that North Korea has lost the ability to distinguish between the symbols and the reality.

Immediately after the bombing in Rangoon last fall that killed a number of important South Korean government officials, most people here were quick to accuse North Korea. Yet one Korean friend, while not disputing the accusations, asked again and again, "What would North Korea have to gain from the bombing?" We both concluded that only deep misunderstanding about South Korean society and the political system here could have led the North to think it has something to gain.

The truce structure at Panmunjom has prevented a hot war here for over thirty years. But descending from the never-never land of Panmunjom to the hurly-burly of Seoul, I wondered if it has also helped to prevent peace by fossilizing the post-Korean War power structure and encouraging North Korea to think it need not take the Seoul government seriously.

Best,



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