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TRIANGULATION**

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KOREA EUROPE REVIEW

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Environmental Cooperation on the Korean Peninsula - A Conflict Transformation Feasibility Study

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Abstract

Despite years of diplomatic efforts, most recently the hope related to the détente starting with the Pyeongchang Winter Olympics in 2018 followed by several inter-Korean and North Korean-US summits, the political situation on the Korean Peninsula looks bleak again in early 2022. This study explores non-traditional approaches toward transforming the 70-years of conflict on the Korean Peninsula. It focuses on the question whether environmental cooperation could be an instrument for the transformation of the conflict between North and South Korea. Through eclectically combined methodological approaches and extensive secondary data research, this article examines whether in less politically laden fields engagement with and in North Korea can be both possible and meaningful, and whether policy exchange in these areas can flourish under otherwise difficult political circumstances. It also explores the significance of non-material incentives and their importance for exchanges with North Korea and international engagement. I conclude that small-scale collaboration projects under multilateral arrangements could be more effective in conflict transformation processes than top-down political initiatives.

Introduction

After three years of a bloody war on the Korean Peninsula, in 1953 the United States, the People's Republic of China, and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea) agreed on an armistice, bringing the Korean War to an end. The new frontier between the two Koreas was established by the power of the armistice agreement signed at Panmunjom. Thus, the new border was consolidated by a heavily fortified demilitarized zone (DMZ). Regardless of numerous rapprochement initiatives undertaken since 1953, no peace treaty was ever signed, and the two Koreas are technically still at war, engaged in a frozen conflict.

This article is motivated by the fact that despite high hopes related to the détente starting with the Pyeongchang Winter Olympics in 2018 and intensified diplomatic exchange, including several inter-Korean and DPRK-US summits, the current political situation on the Korean Peninsula in 2022 still looks bleak. However, this does not mean the end of *all* inter-Korean cooperation. Politicians often look at grand-scale schemes or projects while, at the same time, neglecting the fact that other non-political forms of engagement with North Korea are still

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1. Brian D. Polkinghorne, "Constructing a Baseline Understanding of Developmental Trends in Graduate Conflict Resolution Programs in the United States," in *Pushing the Boundaries: New Frontiers in Conflict Resolution and Collaboration* (Bingley: Emerald Press, 2008).

2. Hugh Miall, "Conflict Transformation: A Multi-Dimensional Task," (Berghof Research Center for Constructive Conflict Management, 2004).

3. The Berghof Foundation is a German independent, non-governmental and non-profit organization supporting people in conflict in their efforts to achieve sustainable peace through conflict transformation and peacebuilding. <https://berghof-foundation.org/about/organisation>

4. Johan Galtung, *Peace by Peaceful Means: Peace and Conflict, Development and Civilization* (London: Sage, 1996).; Louis Kriesberg, "Conflict Transformation," *Peace and Conflict* 2 (1999).; Raimo Väyrynen, "From Conflict Resolution to Conflict Transformation: A Critical Review," *The New Agenda for Peace Research* (2019).

5. John Paul Lederach, *Preparing for Peace: Conflict Transformation across Cultures* (Michigan: Syracuse University Press, 1995).

6. Diana Francis, *People, Peace and Power: Conflict Transformation in Action* (JSTOR, 2002).

7. Veronique Dudouet, "Transitions from Violence to Peace: Revisiting Analysis and Intervention in Conflict Transformation," (2006).

possible. This article looks at the question of whether less politically laden projects can flourish despite otherwise difficult political circumstances. It investigates the peacebuilding potential of environmental cooperative projects with and in North Korea. Hence, this work examines environmental cooperation as a conflict transformation instrument on the Korean Peninsula and explores initiatives undertaken to tackle different environmental issues, the constraints they may face, the conditions under which they work best and the potential they have to develop into broader forms of political cooperation.

The first section reviews previous studies on environmental cooperation as a conflict transformation instrument as well as stresses a number of shortcomings in the systematic study of it. This is followed by a brief contextualization of the inter-Korean conflict that will provide grounding for the next section. The third section investigates the inter-Korean environmental relations and cooperation, showing that small projects still can work in adverse political conditions. The final section discusses the success factors of the environmental cooperation projects and draws a policy of small steps as the right direction to achieve progress in the conflict transformation on the Korean Peninsula.

Conflict transformation

There continues to be considerable terminological variation, overlap, and even contradiction in how different actors and authors define various approaches to working on conflict (conflict management, resolution, transformation). In this article, conflict transformation was chosen as a guiding concept because it is seen as the most deep-reaching and holistic conceptualization of the constructive changes that are needed to build a just peace. However, the academic position of the conflict transformation field is difficult to situate because it is co-mingled with many other fields and programs, appearing in courses in many professional schools, including departments such as law, public administration, and international relations. Many accredited MA and Ph.D. programs provide training and foster research in various aspects of conflict transformation and related fields.¹

Therefore, the first part of this section briefly provides some background and distinguishes *conflict transformation theory* from theories of conflict resolution and conflict management. It carefully analyses some of the principal approaches to conflict transformation and asks whether they constitute a consistent body of theory. Consequently, I consider here a shift from theories of conflict to theories of *conflict-in-context*, pointing out that in the globalized world conflict analysis cannot be conducted without consideration of the international, social, and regional context. It is also necessary to study both, the factors that promote conflict transformation and those that aggravate conflict across these different contexts over an extended period from before the outbreak of violent conflict to after its resolution.²

According to Berghof Glossary on Conflict Transformation³, conflict transformation is best described as a complex process of constructively changing relationships, attitudes, behaviours, interests, and discourses in violence-prone conflict settings. Importantly, it also addresses underlying structures, cultures, and institutions that encourage and condition violent political and social conflict. The term is used in several canonical works within the field of peace and conflict studies⁴, but it has been elaborated most specifically in the works of Lederach⁵ and Francis⁶. As Dudouet puts it, it is "a multi-dimensional, non-linear and unpredictable process involving many different actors in moving from latent and overt violence to structural and cultural peace".⁷

8. Lederach, *Preparing for Peace: Conflict Transformation across Cultures*.

9. David Bloomfield and Ben Reilly, "The Changing Nature of Conflict and Conflict Management," in *Democracy and Deep-Rooted Conflict: Options for Negotiators* (Stockholm: International IDEA, 1998).

10. Edward E. Azar and John W. Burton, *International Conflict Resolution: Theory and Practice* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner and Wheatsheaf, 1986).

11. Lederach, *Preparing for Peace: Conflict Transformation across Cultures*.

12. Galtung, *Peace by Peaceful Means: Peace and Conflict, Development and Civilization*.

Lederach,⁸ for example, articulated the term in the 1980s through his work as a mediator in Latin America. He noticed that people were not content with simply either managing nor eventually resolving conflict-ridden issues because this did not address the deeper problems that caused the conflict in the first place. Although conflict management and resolution were better known and widely accepted in mainstream academic and political circles at that time, for Lederach and his supporters, the horizon of them was too short-term and the focus too content-centred.

Theorists of conflict management perceive violent conflicts a consequences of interest and value differences within and between communities. The violent behaviour arises from both historical relationships and institutions as well as existing distributions of power and the existing institutions and historical accounts, as well as from the established division of powers. Since the resolution of such conflicts is highly unrealistic, conflict management theorists instead suggest focusing on managing and containing them. Under such conditions, the probability of reaching compromise and putting a stop to violence is perceived to be higher. In other words, conflict management means achieving political settlements by putting pressure on conflict parties. It also means designing appropriate political institutions to manage such inevitable conflicts. Thus, conflict management is understood as the positive and constructive handling of differences and divergence.⁹

For conflict resolution theorists and practitioners, the main question is how conflicting parties can move from zero-sum, destructive patterns of conflict to positive-sum constructive outcomes, often with the help of external actors. The aim is to develop processes of conflict resolution that appears to be acceptable to the parties in dispute, and effective in resolving conflict. Therefore, conflict resolution emphasizes immediate solutions.¹⁰ Conflict transformation, on the other hand, focuses its attention on the specific context of relationship patterns.

Both resolution and transformation claim to be process-oriented approaches. However, resolutionists see the development of processes centred on the immediacy of the relationship in which the symptoms of crisis take place, whereas transformationists put existing problems in a broader context and explore behavioural and relational patterns. Therefore, conflict transformation embraces the relationships, interests, discourses, and the very constitution of society that supports the continuation of the conflict. It focuses on the gradual transformation of conflict through a series of changes initiated and conducted by different actors of various levels.¹¹

According to conflict transformation theorists and practitioners, the key dimensions of the peace-creating process are changes in the personal, structural, relational, and cultural aspects of conflict, brought about over different time periods (short-, mid-, and long-term) and affecting different system levels at different times. An appropriate strategy (such as networking between mid-level leaders with links to parties across the conflict) is linked to an appropriate timeframe (such as concentrating on mid-term steps to build a peace constituency), while at the same time embracing a vision of the desired future and an awareness of the current crisis.¹²

In thinking about structure, Lederach contributed the idea of the pyramid with elite leaders and decision-makers at the top, leaders of social organizations, churches, top journalists in the mid-level, and grassroots community leaders at the base. Conflict transformation theorists do not see peace as an endpoint but as an evolving, everchanging quality of relationship. Thus, a comprehensive peace

13. Ibid.

14. Harrison Brown, *The Challenge of Man's Future* (New York: Viking Press, 1954).

15. Tobias Ide, "The Impact of Environmental Cooperation on Peacemaking: Definitions, Mechanisms, and Empirical Evidence," *International Studies Review*, 03 23 2018.

16. Ken Conca and Geoffrey Debelko, *Environmental Peacemaking* (Washington Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2002).

17. Richard H Ullman, "Redefining Security," *International Security* 8, no. 1 (1983); Jessica Tuchman Mathews, "Redefining Security," *Foreign Affairs* 68, no. 2 (1989); Marc A Levy, "Is the Environment a National Security Issue?," *International Security* 20, no. 2 (1995).

process must address changes at all levels. "Peace work, therefore, is characterized by intentional efforts to address the natural ebb and flow of human conflict through nonviolent approaches, which address issues and increase understanding, equality, and respect in relationships."¹³ For all those reasons, the field of conflict transformation does not aim for a grand-scale, complete theory but it proposes, generates, and tests theoretical prepositions through area study research and interaction with practitioners in the field. According to Galtung's *Transcend Method* conflict transformation theory and practice, as well as process/es, comprise:

1. Mapping the conflict formation: all parties, all goals, and all issues;
2. Bringing in forgotten parties with important stakes in the conflict;
3. Having highly empathic dialogues with all parties singly;
4. Each conflict worker may specialize in one conflict party;
5. In these dialogues identifying acceptable goals in all parties;
6. Bringing in forgotten goals that may open new perspectives;
7. Arriving at overarching goals acceptable to all parties;
8. Arriving at short, evocative, goal-formulations;
9. Helping define the tasks for all parties with that goal in mind; disembedding the conflict from where it was, embedding it elsewhere, bringing in forgotten parties, goals;
10. Verifying how realizing that goal would realize parties' goals;
11. Helping parties meet at the table for a self-sustaining process;
12. Withdrawing from the conflict, go on to the next, being on call.

In summary, conflict transformation includes, but is not limited by, the contributions and approaches proposed by resolution-based language. It transcends the focus on the resolution of a particular problem or episode of conflict. In other words, conflict transformation is about transforming the very systems, structures, and relationships underlying and giving rise to violence and injustice. Nevertheless, conflict transformation is not without its challenges and critics. It calls for such wide-ranging and deep-reaching changes that it may actually intensify conflict in the short run by proposing a disturbing process of change that touches (and threatens) beliefs, relationships, power, positions, and status. Some even go as far as to claim that conflict transformation can only be a guiding notion rather than being a fully implemented program in practice. Others propose prioritization, for example with an emphasis on relationship-building.

Environmental cooperation as a conflict transformation instrument

Environmental issues were not part of the mainstream political and academic discourse until the mid-1990s. One of the latest approaches suggesting using environmental cooperation as a tool for conflict transformation emerged in the 1990s in an attempt to find more effective instruments to solve conflicts while, in the new millennium and in the aftermath of 9/11, it has gained greater attention from policymakers. While the relationship between the environment and security has been a focus of research since the 1950s,¹⁴ both the analysis and perception of environmental cooperation as part of the process of conflict transformation have changed dynamically in recent years.

The concept of environmental peacebuilding, Tobias Ide points out, "refers to all forms of cooperation on environmental issues between distinct social groups, which aim at and/or achieve creating less violent and more peaceful relations between these groups".¹⁵ In this context, the term 'peace' refers to both negative and positive forms of peace.¹⁶ Some scholars¹⁷ have focused on

18. Daniel Deudney, “The Limits of Environmental Security»,” *Flashpoints in Environmental Policymaking: Controversies in Achieving Sustainability* (1997).; Macartan Humphreys, “Natural Resources, Conflict, and Conflict Resolution: Uncovering the Mechanisms,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 49, no. 4 (2005).

19. Deudney, “The Limits of Environmental Security».”

20. Chester Crocker, “Thoughts on the Conflict Management Field after 20 Years,” *International Negotiations* (2011).

21. Arthur H Westing, “The Korean Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) as a Bridge between the Two Koreas,” *Participant Papers 2010: A World Without Walls* (2010).

22. Richard Anthony Matthew, Mark Halle, and Jason Switzer, *Conserving the Peace: Resources, Livelihoods and Security* (International Institute for Sustainable Development Winnipeg, 2002).

23. Conca and Debelko, *Environmental Peacemaking*.; Annika Kramer, *Regional Water Cooperation and Peacebuilding in the Middle East* (Initiative for Peacebuilding Adelphi research, 2008).; Jennifer Wallace and Ken Conca, “Peace through Sustainable Forest Management in Asia: The Usaid Forest Conflict Initiative,” in *High-Value Natural Resources and Post-Conflict Peacebuilding* (Routledge, 2012).; Westing, “The Korean Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) as a Bridge between the Two Koreas.”

24. Sarka Waisova, *Environmental Cooperation as a Tool for Conflict Transformation and Resolution* (London: Lexington Books, 2017).

25. Ibid.

26. Anthony Turton et al., *Governance as a Tri-Dialogue: Government-Society-Science in Transition* (New York: Springer, 2007).

environmental challenges as the cause of conflict and threat to security. They considered environmental degradation and the lack of natural resources a threat to the national interest. However, since the 1990s, a relatively small number of scientists¹⁸ started questioning the causality between extensive natural resource consumption and environmental degradation, and a higher risk of the outbreak of violence. On the contrary, Deudney¹⁹ argues that “environmental scarcity” can lead to the creation of joint interests, thus to a joint approach with the aim of addressing the degradation.

The idea of using environmental cooperation as a tool for conflict transformation surfaced in the 1990s when the first analyses of environmental cooperation in conflict-affected areas were carried out.²⁰ Authors such as Arthur Westing often worked as environmental experts and propagated the so-called natural peace parks in their texts.²¹ Particular attention was paid to conflicts over water, diamonds, coltan, and tropical timber.²²

Later some scholars and practitioners²³ began to consider the possibility of using environmental cooperation as a tool for conflict transformation regardless of the cause, intensity, and stage of the conflict. Soon after, the same idea also reached certain international institutions. What is more, it subsequently appeared on the agenda of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, the United Nations Environment Programme, the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, the European Union, NATO, international environmental agencies, and many non-governmental organizations (World Wildlife Fund, MacArthur Foundation).²⁴

Despite the growing number of projects declaring the use of environmental cooperation as a tool for conflict transformation and/or resolution, and growing scholarly interest in the issue, the actual conditions for the establishment of a sufficient level of environmental cooperation and its operation in conflict-affected areas remain rather unclear. Although there are many studies of specific cases, systematic analyses, and research designs using a single, comparable analytical framework geared to the testing of specific hypotheses across a larger spectrum of cases are still missing. Therefore, and echoing above mentioned authors, this article is concerned with the question of how environmental problems can be a force of cooperation, with all parties benefiting.²⁵

Environmental issues, conservation, and sustainable use of scarce resources such as water, land, and air; preservation of endangered species extinction; reduction and clean-up of pollution are uniquely suited to promote peace. As nature does not know human-made borders, environmental problems do not stop at them and demand joint actions from groups that might differ in other regards. Because environmental issues are complex, they often need to be approached in an innovative and unconventional way and this requires dialogue even when the parties are hostile or in open conflict. Therefore, environmental issues are one of the very few topics inherently driving and sustaining dialogue. What is more, common environmental challenges and joint cooperation in addressing them may boost trust-building processes and create a safe zone for knowledge exchange. Hence, cooperation on common environmental problems is perceived as a suitable tool for the transformation of relationships marred by conflict.²⁶

According to Ide, environmental cooperation between (past, current, or potential) adversaries can lead to more peaceful relations between states through four main pathways: First, it can improve the environmental situation, hence addressing environment-related grievances, mitigating environmental conflicts, and improving livelihoods. Second, environmental cooperation can increase trust and understanding by encouraging adversaries to work together and by

27. Galtung, *Peace by Peaceful Means: Peace and Conflict, Development and Civilization.*; Lothar Brock, "Peace through Parks: The Environment on the Peace Research Agenda," *Journal of Peace Research* 28, no. 4 (1991).

28. Bruce Cumings, *The Korean War* (New York: Modern Library, 2010).

29. Don Oberdorfer, *The Two Koreas* (Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley, 1997).

30. DPRK repeatedly provoked South Korea militarily. For example, the attempt of North Korean agents to attack the Blue House (Cheong Wa Dae, the residence of the president of the Republic of Korea) in 1968; the assassination of members of the South Korean cabinet by DPRK agents or; the detonation of a bomb on a Korean Air airplane in the autumn of 1987.

31. In the document, among other things, both Koreas agreed on the establishment of a hotline between the North and South to prevent any escalation of potential disputes.

32. The Sunshine Policy, or Engagement Policy, is a term for South Korean politics toward the DPRK between the years 1998 and 2009. It was characterized by overall warming of relationships and by an intensification of mutual economic, political, and social contact.

providing opportunities for win-win interactions. Third, such cooperation highlights inter-dependencies between various parties and can thus provide an entry point for follow-up cooperation (e.g., when cooperation on flood management stimulates further collaboration on electricity or fishing) and is therefore cultivating interdependence and cooperative mindsets. Finally, environmental cooperation may facilitate the building of institutions, which provide forums for conflict transformation and dialogue.

Environmental cooperation may therefore be considered an independent variable of world politics. It has the potential to positively influence regional and international issues because it helps participants to internalize cooperative norms, build shared regional interests and identities, channel and establish routine transnational communication and impede on the acceptability of using violence. What is more, environmental cooperation has the potential to strengthen trust between conflicting parties; it can help teach peacebuilding habits, which may spill over into political dialogue and build bridges between parties.²⁷ As environmental issues ignore political boundaries, they therefore have the potential to inject a degree of objective and depoliticized discourse into the negotiations. Correspondingly, a cooperative approach to planning, management, and the use of environmental resources can boost confidence, communication, and interactions between conflict parties and contribute to the transformation of threats and uncertainties.

Korean War and its aftermath

In order to understand why environmental cooperation is a suitable and promising method of conflict transformation on the Korean peninsula, this section briefly contextualizes the history and current state of conflict between North and South Korea.

The relationship between the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK, North Korea) and the Republic of Korea (ROK, South Korea) has been in conflict since the establishment of two separate governments in 1948. The most heightened period of conflict in the relationship was during the Korean War (1950-1953). The war did not solve the conflict but contributed to the economic decline of both North and South Korea and devastated the landscape of the peninsula.

In 1953, the United States, the People's Republic of China, and North Korea agreed on an armistice, bringing the Korean War to an end. Since that time, the inter-Korean conflict has not been resolved despite many attempts and different approaches.²⁸ Since the end of the Korean War, the North-South Korean relationship can be divided into five stages so far. From 1953 to 1970, both Koreas presented hostile, confrontational attitudes toward each other. Strong anti-communist sentiments in the South and pervasive anti-South propaganda have not allowed any kind of rapprochement between the states. The next three years have seen first attempts at normalizing relations with its' culmination in 1972 when both parties signed a Joint Communiqué under which they confirmed that the armed conflict was not the way to reunify the peninsula.²⁹ The third stage, also called a period of "frozen confrontation" when all normalization attempts failed due to lack of mutual trust and incompatible expectations, lasted until 1990.³⁰ The end of the Cold War brought a "wind of change" not only to Europe but also to individuals on both sides of the DMZ who saw opportunities for the warming of neighbour relations. Between 1990 and 2009, both Koreas made efforts to establish better relationships that resulted first in signing the Agreement on Reconciliation, Non-Aggression, and Exchange and Cooperation³¹ between South and North Korea, and subsequently evolved into the so-called Sunshine Policy

33. Cumings, *The Korean War*.

34. Oberdorfer, *The Two Koreas*.

35. Jinsuk Byun, "The Environmental Issues of a Unified Korea" (paper presented at the 1st Annual Conference of the CSIS-USC Korea Project, Honolulu, 2010).

36. Taek-Whan Han, "Northeast Asia Environmental Cooperation: Progress and Prospects," *Trade and Environment* (1994).

37. Kim, Rakhyun. „International Environmental Cooperation of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea.“ (Vermont: DMZ Forum, 2015).

38. Lisa Brady, "How Wildlife Is Thriving in the Korean Peninsula’s Demilitarised Zone," *China Dialogue* (2012).

39. Peter Hocknell, "Partitioned States, Divided Resources: North/South Korea and Cases for Comparison," *Boundary and Security Bulletin* (1996).

40. The relatively vague expression "peaceful use" of the DMZ can be understood in many different ways. Besides its biological use, cultural and economic uses are also spoken about. Due to the untouched integrity of the landscape, this area can also serve as a certain „laboratory“ with unique natural conditions.

41. Han, "Northeast Asia Environmental Cooperation: Progress and Prospects."

42. Oberdorfer, *The Two Koreas*.

43. Benjamin Habib, "North Korea and the Global Fight against Climate Change," *The Diplomat* (2016).

44. Byun, "The Environmental Issues of a Unified Korea."

on part of South Korea.³² During that time, numerous inter-Korean governmental and non-governmental projects at various levels, as well as people-to-people exchange programs had been initiated. Most recently, a renewed deterioration of relations took place along with DPRK’s nuclear testing in 2006, and the sinking of the South Korean corvette Cheonan in 2010.³³

The armistice signed in Panmunjom in 1953 established a frontier between the Koreas that was roughly defined by the narrow waist of the peninsula, and, at that time, the border was consolidated by a so-called demilitarized zone (DMZ), which was heavily fortified by mines and tank traps, huge embankments, and formidably high barbed-wire fences. Zealously enforced by the hard-nosed soldiery on both sides, these barriers forbade all access to a zone as much as 2.5 miles across, extending from the Yellow Sea all the way east to the Sea of Japan/East Sea. In addition, this DMZ was buffered on the South Korean side by a Civilian Control Zone (CCZ), of comparable width, where controlled farming – but no habitation – was permitted.³⁴ As a consequence, the inter-Korean frontier has developed into a kind of an unintended nature reserve. While the 154-mile-long borderland, once densely populated and farmed, was abandoned by humans, species that were otherwise eliminated from the rest of the peninsula – the Asiatic black bear, the Siberian musk deer, red-crowned cranes, and white-naped cranes – found a peaceful haven.³⁵

Environmental cooperation on the Korean Peninsula

Interest in environmental protection emerged in South Korea in the late 1970s in the context of the fight against deforestation.³⁶ Environmental protection subsequently gained greater attention during the following decades. In North Korea, the tradition of interest in environmental questions is shorter still. As stated by Kim,³⁷ forests which used to account for 80 percent of the total surface area of North Korea, became an important tool for economic development. This was intricately connected to the boom in heavy industry, which was hardly compatible with environmental protection. Therefore, no real steps toward environmental protection were taken until the mid-1980s. However, even today, interest in environmental protection in North Korea is still rather weak.

Joint inter-Korean projects in the environmental field have developed very slowly. The protection of the DMZ was the very first theme of inter-Korean environmental cooperation.³⁸ This proposal first appeared in the 1970s, during the period of the temporary warming of relationships. The first debates on the establishment of a transboundary reserve took place exclusively at an academic level in South Korea in the mid-1960s.³⁹ In 1971, the chief representative of the United Nations Command, Military Armistice Commission, F. H. Rogers, presented the proposal on the peaceful use⁴⁰ of the DMZ.⁴¹ This proposal was also supported by the South Korean Foreign Minister, Kim Yong-shik. The first inter-Korean negotiations took place in 1973, interrupted by the so-called Yellow Sea Incident, and by the North Korean crossings of the Northern Limit Line, which nipped the possible development of environmental cooperation in the bud.⁴²

In South Korea, after the end of the Cold War, the proposals from the 1970s on the transformation of the DMZ into a UNESCO natural reserve were reconsidered at the governmental level, but the DPRK showed no interest.⁴³ Direct bilateral negotiations on the reserve did not take place until 2000 during the first Inter-Korean Summit and the second one in October 2007; however, once again no real steps toward cooperation were made.⁴⁴ Further initiatives were undertaken by the administration of President Lee Myung-bak defining the peaceful

45. Woosuk Jung, "Environmental Challenges and Cooperation," *Focus Asia* (2016).

46. Byun, "The Environmental Issues of a Unified Korea."

47. Rakhyun Kim, "International Environmental Cooperation of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea".

48. HSF began its first projects in the DPRK in 2003; however, they gained the environmental dimension in 2011. Besides the project in Anbyon and the fight against deforestation, HSF supports the start of emission trading between North and South Korea (Seliger, 2014).

49. Brady, "How Wildlife Is Thriving in the Korean Peninsula's Demilitarised Zone."

50. Kim, "International Environmental Cooperation of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea."

51. Bernhard Seliger, "Small in Beautiful: Environmental Cooperation and Peace on the Korean Peninsula," *The Journal of East Asian Affairs* (2020).

52. Nicholas Eberstadt, "North Korea's Epic Economic Fail," (Seoul, Republic of Korea: Asan Institute for Policy Studies, 2015).

use of the DMZ as a national priority. Subsequently, from 2009 to 2011 an entire range of proposals on inter-Korean environmental cooperation in the DMZ was created.⁴⁵ However, once again, they were not implemented. Another attempt to recover the emphasis on cooperation in the field of environmental conservation was brought about by the administration of President Park Geun-hye. She became the propagator of the term *Green Détente* and the building of a peace eco-park in the DMZ. However, the South Korean government failed to convert the rhetoric into practice. Also, as noted by Byun,⁴⁶ the project of the park in the DMZ is, in practice, hardly achievable because it is far from being an area outside of the political and security interests of the Koreans, as claimed by many. Therefore, the question is whether intergovernmental cooperation inside the DMZ is the correct steppingstone for transforming the conflict through environmental cooperation?

Projects of cooperation at a non-governmental level have been developing in a more promising direction. There is a remarkably interesting symbiosis between non-governmental organizations (NGOs) from third countries, which are regarded as implementers of projects in the DPRK, and South Korean NGOs, which support projects financially or logistically. The initiative has been taken by both foreign NGOs and South Korean NGOs. The pioneering project on combined cooperation in the field of organic agriculture and the restoration of natural habitats for cranes on a collective farm in the village of Pisan, near the town of Anbyon, is a case in point.⁴⁷ The *BirdLife International*, the German *Hanns Seidel Foundation* (HSF),⁴⁸ and the American *International Crane Foundation* were the main initiators and implementers.⁴⁹ The farm was subject to significant technological innovation; employees were trained in China in the field of organic agriculture and the natural value of the Anbyon plain. South Korean NGOs *The Korean Federation for Environmental Movement*, *Friends of Earth Korea*, and the *Environmental Ecosystem Research Foundation* used this project as a rare opportunity for environmental cooperation with the DPRK, in the form of financial support.⁵⁰

In 2014 an international project mapping the habitat in the Rason Migratory Birds Reserve began. The cooperating actors on this project were South Korean NGOs and NGOs from third countries (HSF, EERF, Birds Korea) and international organizations/platforms, Russian and Chinese scientists, and North Korean scientists. North Korea declared the Rason region a natural reserve in 1995; though proper field research was only performed as late as 2014. However, it is still true that the South Korean actors are not able to directly participate in this project but only support it financially and logistically. Representatives of international NGOs think that in a situation where inter-Korean cooperation is almost impossible, the multinationalisation of the project is the potential way to establish cooperation between North and South Korea.⁵¹

Similarly, the shared experience of fighting deforestation represents an opportunity for North-South joint actions. In the early 1960s, the Republic of Korea (ROK) was one of the poorest and least developed countries in the world, with a nominal GDP of \$82 (USD) per capita. It seemed unlikely that the ROK could rehabilitate its forests, which had been devastated during the Japanese occupation (1910-1945) followed by the Korean War (1950-1953). The most important driver behind the concerted reforestation efforts was President Park Chung-hee's dedication towards pursuing forest rehabilitation. His personal commitment towards developing the economy and alleviating poverty placed forest rehabilitation efforts at the core of his economic agenda.⁵²

53. MiSun Park, "Inter-Korean Forest Cooperation 1998-2012: A Policy Arrangement Approach," *Sustainability* (2015).

54. Kim, "International Environmental Cooperation of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea."

55. *Ibid.*

56. Park, "Inter-Korean Forest Cooperation 1998-2012: A Policy Arrangement Approach."

57. Habib, "North Korea and the Global Fight against Climate Change."

58. Seliger, "Small in Beautiful: Environmental Cooperation and Peace on the Korean Peninsula."

Nearly 20 years later, North Korea had to face the same problem. Forests, which used to account for 80 percent of the total surface area of North Korea, became an important resource of economic development.⁵³ In North Korea, the process of erosion increased by the expansion of the cultivated area on slopes and the logging for energy generation. Due to the erosion process, the natural drainage is so low that a large amount of precipitation in the rainy season cannot be absorbed by the soil. Outlets of water, scree and sludge pour and endanger the lives and limbs of the people living in the affected areas and lead to a consequent loss of their agricultural value (devastation). The reforestation of the DPRK represents an opportunity for potential inter-Korean cooperation, as South Korea has significant experience with reforestation from the 1970s and, therefore, can act as a useful partner for North Korea in this regard. Furthermore, the DPRK continuously emphasizes the need to cope with severe degradation of the country's forests,⁵⁴ which may signal that it will be more willing to cooperate in this particular sphere.

The first proposals from the South Korean government on reforestation projects in the DPRK began to emerge at the time of the partial stabilization of the North Korean economic situation at the end of the 1990s. The first project was initiated by the South Korean Society for the Protection of Trees in the Mount Kumgang Region in 1999 and supported the research cooperation and the transfer of South Korean know-how on the extermination of parasites.⁵⁵ In 2000, the DPRK positively responded to other South Korean cooperative proposals during the reforestation of the same region. Then, in 2002, both Koreas reached an agreement on providing tree seedlings for the reforestation of the areas around the Imjin River.⁵⁶ In 2003, the planned projects were implemented in the DPRK by the Red Cross, and the Korean Council for Reconciliation and Cooperation (in the years 2007, 2008, and 2010). However, after 2010, the development of agroforestry cooperation flagged again as a result of worsening relationships. Again, third parties' assistance was necessary to implement other projects focused on the reforestation of North Korea.⁵⁷

In 2015, a group of international organizations including IUCN, WWF, and HSF started working together to bring North Korea into several international conventions (Ramsar Convention on Wetlands; East Asian Australasian Flyway Partnership) on environmental conservation, hence spreading awareness about biodiversity, climate change and nature protection among North Koreans, bringing it into the (EAAFP). Moreover, thanks to the cooperation with those INGOs, North Korea designated an authority to cooperate directly with the Green Climate Fund and in cooperation with the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) started a first preparatory "readiness" project (Green Climate Fund 2019).⁵⁸ While those small-scale projects were not designed as inter-Korean cooperation projects, through frequent exchanges with South Korean academics, practitioners, and officials, the inter-Korean trust-building process and the possibility of more direct contacts also progressed.

Conclusion

Considering the above-listed natural conditions of the Korean Peninsula as well as problems and opportunities emerging from it, there are clear signs that cooperation on common environmental challenges has the potential of becoming an effective tool for conflict transformation despite the tense political situation. I therefore argue that environmental cooperation can increase trust and understanding by encouraging adversaries to work together and by providing opportunities

for win-win interactions for both Koreas. The major reason why the projects on environment and biodiversity, mentioned in the previous section, can be considered successful is in regard to building trust. In those cases, the preconditional trust was already gained during several previous, small-scale projects. In other words, the trust that has been built by working together in one area provided an entry point for follow-up cooperation and can, therefore, be considered to have cultivated interdependence.

Secondly, as concerns the question of how to cooperate with North Korea when trust is not a given in the first place, one tested idea is that of “borrowing trust” from well-established international settings. The more extensive an international framework is, starting with numbers of participating entities, and the more clearly structured and established, like the UN framework, the higher the probability that the DPRK will be willing to join it. Moreover, the reintegration of North Korea into international environmental structures is a great opportunity not only to bring people together and facilitate cooperation across the Korean border, but also to build institutions, which provide forums for conflict transformation and dialogue.

Considering the difficult inter-Korean political relations, cooperation on common environmental matters also has the potential of becoming an effective tool for conflict transformation. The natural environment ignores political boundaries and often demands from humans a cooperative approach to planning, management, and the use of resources, which can boost confidence, communication, and interactions even between conflict parties and contribute to the transformation of threats and uncertainties.

Very clearly, the ultimate goal is big joint projects, bringing the people of North and South Korea together, but in the current state of affairs, carrying out small, feasible projects on less politically sensitive matters, like environmental and biodiversity preservation, remains the right option.

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