

Tunnel vision.

A TRIP TO THE KOREAN DEMILITARIZED ZONE



CENTRE
FOR INTERNATIONAL
RELATIONS

Comment

10/2015

www.csm.org.pl



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There are many ways to develop an eye disease called tunnel vision. It can be obtained through a glaucoma, blood loss, sleep deprivation, in times of extreme distress and fear or even during the worst parts of migraine attack. When combined with conducting a vehicle or operating heavy machinery, the consequences can be fatal. Let's then try to imagine a place where the loss of peripheral vision with retention of its central part, resulting in a constricted circular tunnel-like field of vision (as properly described by an ophthalmologist) is the only way to observe the reality.

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It is called DMZ. Again it sounds medically, but this time it's a military acronym which stands for Demilitarized Zone. About 250 km long and 4 km wide DMZ is a *de facto* border between two Koreas. Cuts the Korean Peninsula circling around the main line of 38th parallel. It was created in 1953 as a part of the Korean Armistice Agreement between the North, China and United Nations Command forces. After 3 years, 1 month and 2 days of the Korean War.

The conflict on Korean Peninsula was not only another important testing ground for checking new military technologies like jet fighters and medevac procedures. It was mainly an important milestone for checking whether the post-WWII *status quo* will be held unbroken.

Korean War saw many unexpected things to happen like perennial rivals Turkey and Greece fighting along each other on the UN side. Military support came even from distant part of the world like Colombia and Ethiopia. For the first and last as well time in the history of United Nations the world saw an UN Command forces ready to fight for the just cause. Although former Soviet Union backed China and North Korea supplying them with arms, it decided not to block the UN Security Council during an

important voting over Resolution 83 recommending member states provide military assistance to the Republic of Korea. Instead of placing its veto the Soviets preferred to boycott the UNSC meetings protesting that the Republic of China (Taiwan), not the People's Republic of China, held a permanent seat in the UN Security Council.

38 degrees of separation

Since the July 27th 1953 the Demilitarized Zone has witnessed many acts of terror. The North always acted as a perpetrator causing as much damage to the Joint Security Area and to the peacekeeping soldiers who served there. Despite the name it's the most heavily militarized demarcation line in the world. From above it looks like a beautiful forest full of various species of animals, some of them even endangered. However this sanctuary for wildlife is in the same time a real hell on Earth for those who may like to cross it on their own.

The Koreans say that when the war ended the North used to drop landmines right from the choppers. There are some 2 mln of them in the DMZ area. From time to time an innocent mammal of a medium size steps on a mine and the overwhelming silence over the place gets torn. Sometime instead

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of a bear or a leopard a soldier from South can be maimed as well. Such thing happened on the August 9th 2015.

North Korea never stops trying to interfere with the peace building process. The mines which wounded South Koreans were allegedly placed on the south side of the border. August 4th incident nearly triggered a war, Kim Jong-un desperately tried to enrage his south counterparts. Luckily after 40-some hour talks the regime decided to quit its demands and even made a formal statement of regret, which for the South side sounded like apologies.

Of course few days later Pyongyang backs to its normal hate speech. Seoul however does not abandon the hopes to overcome the situation and to make that hostile environment a unified Korea. The date, the methods and the cost of the unification procedures are hardly even possible to establish. No mathematics formula on when regime falls exists, nor there is a chance to make the unexperienced Kim Jong-un become a western-savvy leader, but the South Korea still waits and prepares to every kind of possibility.

New weapon of mass destruction

Issues from North are treated not only as a international affairs (North Korea is still an independent country) but as well there is a separate Ministry of Unification along with various institutes. Cho Han-bum, Director of Korean Institute for National Unification, keeps telling me that Seoul does not think of North Korean leader as a lunatic. Politician know that the Pyongyang policy is more like salami cutting, because the only thing the regime wants is the money to keep it tuning as long as possible.

One of the weapons that the South wants to use against the Communists are the tourists. Sometimes indeed capable of destruction on a massive scale, this time they serve as a binding material which flows near the disputed border. With a special permission you can go to the Dora Camp observatory and have a look through one of the binoculars to the North side. If the weather is good you can have a glimpse at the fourth-tallest flagpole in the world in the Kijŏng-dong. If the sky is perfectly clear (which sometimes can be bigger problem than persuading the North to your point at the negotiating table), the tourists observe the statue of Kim Il-sung, one of more than 20 thousand in the

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whole country, immortalised with a hand weaving salute.

Soldiers are the tour guides. You can ask them everything, speaking perfect English and acting with the utmost politeness. They are still very young which can be told from their faces. Military service is mandatory and each of them has to spend an average 21 months of active duty. After the observation deck they transport you to the so-called 3rd tunnel. It's a real hole in the earth dug by North Koreans to serve as a highway to conduct a surprise attack on the capital. Seoul is only 44 km from there.

Architecture of evil

The Third Tunnel of Aggression (that's the full name of the site) was discovered in October 1978 based on the information gathered from the North Korean defector. It is one of four similar tunnels already discovered and secured by the South, and probably under the DMZ might be even hundreds of others. Taking photos inside of the 3rd is forbidden so you can just write down the technical details given to you by the soldiers. The defector showed the army the approximate place of the tunnel and it took additional 107 drillings of PVC tubes of 75 mm diameter placed every 2 metres,

water injection, 3 years of waiting for it to come out and then additional 5 more accurate drillings. The corridor dug 73 metres beneath the ground level emade a 435 metres intrusion on the a South side.

The tunnel is quite claustrophobic, definitely not for the tall ones. Soldiers give you a yellow helmet like those from construction sites and at first you consider it a mean of too rigid precaution. After another bump in the ceiling you thank them every time it gets harder to walk straight. Whole length of the tunnel is 1635 meters, however tourist can cross only 265 of them. The walls are still covered with holes drilled for TNT. The military guides ask you to have a look at the black stones. They tell you that the whole tunnel was painted black by the North Koreans to pretend it's a coal mine. It didn't lasted long when the South conducted a soil analysis of the ground to be sure that there is no coal only granite.

You keep heading to the North and to get to the real tunnel you have to first fight with the 358-meters long 14-degree slope of an artificial corridor set for the tourist purposes. The real thing of aggression inclines only unnoticeable 3 degrees north to avoid any water run towards south. Invasion was supposed to keep in secret as long as possi-

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ble. The size of the construction allows around 30 thousands military armed with light artillery cross the border every hour. It might be kind of strange to imagine that nobody discovered the tunnel right when it was constructed (it required a lot of dynamite, explosions and the material had to be excavated by hundreds of lorries), but the whole process took place in the 70s, only two decades after the Korean War ended. South Korea admits that it had not enough technology and resources to see it coming.

The impression is depressing and even the excellent grilled octopus grilled in spicy sauce served in nearby Imjingak does not feels like a relief. Each parking lot has a shelter for the villagers packed with gas masks, sanitary products and food supplies. It should last for 24 hours for about 300 people. Then they move to another one of the condition above the ground does not improve. South Koreans who decide to live near DMZ can count on the benefits from the government: subsidiaries for the agriculture (in the tourist shop by the tunnel you can buy honey and rice produced right nearby) and their kids can be granted free tuitions at universities.

DMZ lays around 40 km from Seoul. The capital can be invaded anytime but you

cannot feel any pressure among the citizens. It's just your head that keeps searching for possible danger, even an innocent plane model guided by a remote control above a school playground seen when you enter the city looks like a lethal drone sent from the North to annihilate as much as possible. Trip to the DMZ can serve as a way to calm your nerves and the way to think out-of-the-box. It's what the South Korea does all the time to keep their neighbours both happy and willing to negotiate towards an unification which might happen someday.

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CSM is an independent, non-government analytical centre established in 1996 and dealing with Polish foreign policy and the most important issues of international politics. CSM is active in research, education and publishing, organises conferences and meetings, and participates in international projects in collaboration with similar institutions in many countries. CSM creates a forum for debate and exchange of ideas in matters of international politics, relations between states and challenges in the global world. CSM's activities are addressed above all to local-government officials and to entrepreneurs, as well as to officials of the central administration, politicians, diplomats, political scientists and the media. In 2009, CSM was recognised as one of the best think-tanks in East-Central Europe in the study "The Leading Public Policy Research Organisations in the World" conducted by the University of Pennsylvania.

