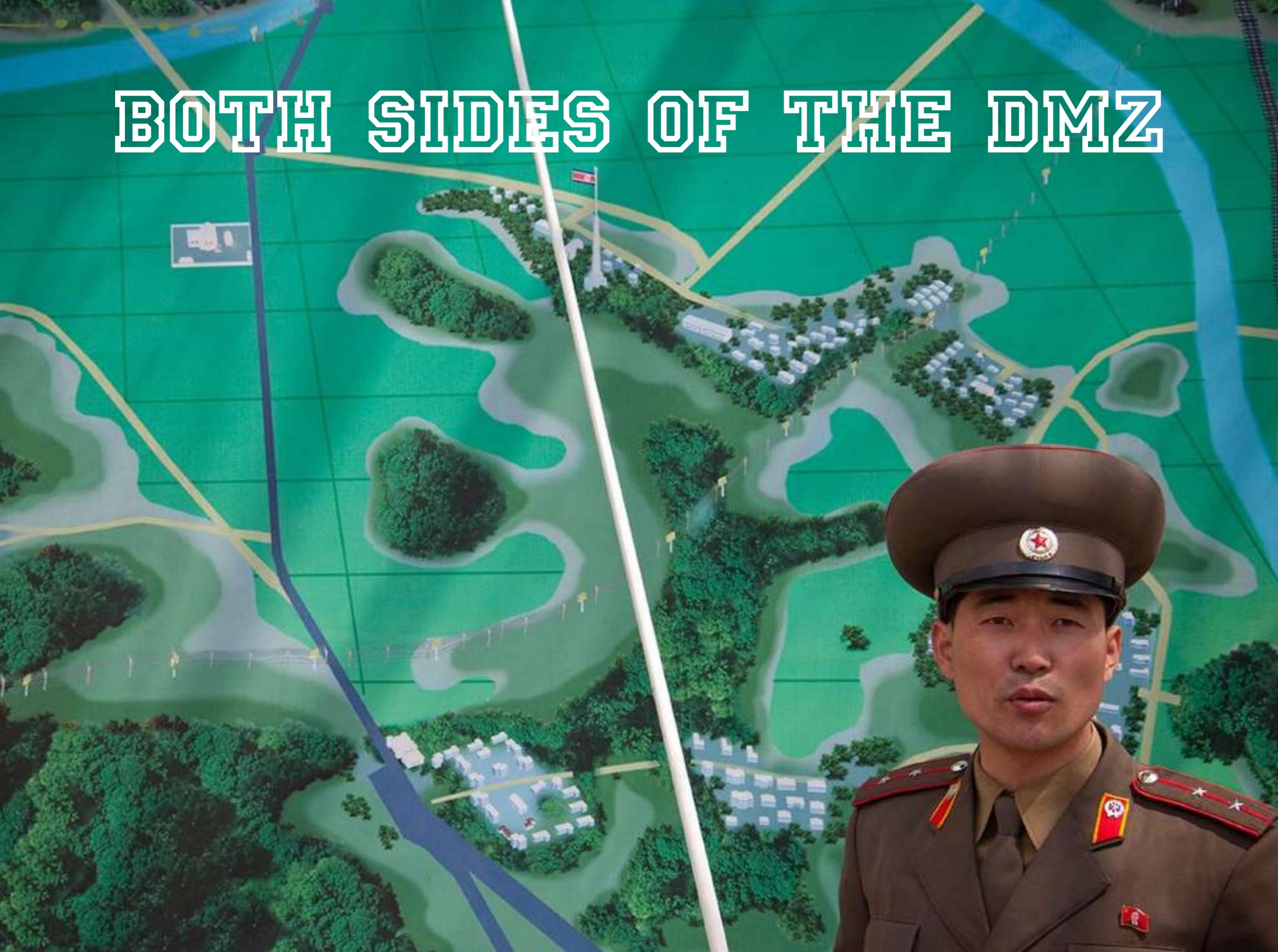


BOTH SIDES OF THE DMZ



I first visited the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) on the North Korean side in 2008. The DMZ is a 250km long and 4km wide stretch of land that serves as a buffer zone between North and South Korea. I went back five more times before being banned by the North Korean regime.

I visited the DMZ on the South Korean side twice, in 2016 and 2017.

There are huge differences between the two sides but not always the way one might expect...

The two Koreas have signed an armistice but not peace. The Joint Security Area (JSA) in Panmunjom is called a "demilitarized zone" but in fact, it is the world's most heavily armed area as well as a major tourist attraction, both in North and South Korea, with more than 100,000 tourists visiting each year.



In North Korea, the DMZ can be reached from Kaesong. These huge cement blocks can be seen all along the highway near the border with South Korea. They can be used to block the highway in case of an American invasion.



In South Korea, there is nothing out of the ordinary on the highway.



On both sides, a soldier enters the tourist bus to reach the JSA. In South Korea, it is absolutely prohibited to take pictures on the way. In North Korea, you can take as many photographs as you want – even of a soldier resting his helmet on the embroidered seat cover.

VISITOR DECLARATION (UNC REG 551-5)

VISITORS TO THE JOINT SECURITY AREA ARE REQUIRED TO READ AND SIGN THE FOLLOWING:

1. The visit to the Joint Security Area at Panmunjom will entail the entrance into a hostile area and the possibility of injury or death as a direct result of enemy action. The Joint Security Area is neutral but divided and is guarded by United Nations Command military personnel on the one side (South), and Korean People's Army personnel on the other (North). Guests of the United Nations Command are not permitted to cross the Military Demarcation Line into the portion of the Joint Security Area under control of the Korean People's Army. Although being on the alert for unexpected conditions, the United Nations Command, the United States of America, and the Republic of Korea cannot guarantee the safety of visitors and may not be held accountable in the event of a hostile enemy act.
2. Visitors must comply with the following instructions:
 - a. UNC military personnel will wear appropriate military uniform prescribed by their service for off-duty wear. Other visitors will be dressed in appropriate civilian attire so as to maintain the dignity of the United Nations Command.
 - b. Prior to entering the Joint Security Area, each visitor (including military personnel) will receive a laminated guest badge which identifies him/her as an authorized guest of the United Nations Command. Guest badges must be worn on the upper left side of the outermost garment. Guest badges must be returned in prior to departure from Camp Bonifas.
 - c. Fraternalization, including speaking, making gestures or associating with personnel from the Korean People's Army/Chinese People's Volunteers (KPA/CPV) side, is strictly prohibited. Personnel from the KPA/CPV side are identified as follows:
 - (1) Military Personnel - Brown or Olive drab North Korean uniforms with red arm bands for guards with weapons and yellow arm bands for Military Armistice Commission personnel.
 - (2) Press personnel - Green arm bands.
 - (3) Visitors - Green pieces of cloth at upper pocket
 - d. Visitors will not point, make gestures, or expressions like scoffing, abnormal action which could be used by the North Korean side as propaganda material against the United Nations Command.
 - e. Visitors will remain in a group from the beginning to the end of the tour and will follow all instructions from their tour guide.
 - f. Firearms, knives, or weapons of any type will not be taken into the JSA. In any case, there is no drinking alcohol and those who have consumed alcohol in the last 12 hours will not be accepted.
 - g. The area and buildings (tan colored) under the military control of the Communist side will not be entered for any reason. Permission of the tour guide must be obtained prior to entry into UNC buildings (blue colored) in the JSA.
 - h. At no time will visitors stand in the way of or interfere with military formations. Facilities and equipment inside the conference room will not be handled. Photography is permitted in the JSA but is prohibited en route between Checkpoint A (the entrance to Camp Bonifas) and Checkpoint C (the entrance to the JSA).
 - i. If any incidents should occur, remain calm, and follow instructions issued by security personnel.
3. Any questions concerning the above information should be brought to the attention of the tour guide.

Before going to the DMZ from Seoul, you are warned by the tour company that the following clothing items are strictly prohibited:

"Shorts, mini-skirts, provocative clothing, sportswear, tank tops, sleeveless shirts, jeans (though they are acceptable as long as they are not ripped or faded), dresses, sandals (though they are acceptable if there are straps), high heels, military style clothing, leather clothing, flip-flops and rubber slippers." Tattoos must also be covered.

These measures are seemingly aimed at preventing North Koreans from photographing Western visitors to show their citizens how degenerate they are.

Again, once you arrive at the American Camp Bonifas near the DMZ, you must sign a declaration (seen in the picture) if you want to visit the zone.

It outlines what you are prohibited from doing (fraternizing with the North Korean soldiers...) and bringing with you (weapons, alcohol...)

In North Korea, there are no such requests.



Once you are in the border area, both in North and South Korea, you will be treated to an explanation of the DMZ history. In North Korea, you are brought to a museum of sorts, while in the South, you are shown a PowerPoint presentation by an American soldier in a large and comfortable auditorium.

But both sides have different versions of history.

For example, North Korea displays pictures of the infamous 1976 "axe murder incident," when two American soldiers were killed by North Korean ones.

North Korea claims that the Americans had illegally entered their territory.

In the South, they explain that the North attacked them with axes without any valid reason.





Both sides display mock-ups of the DMZ in the Joint Security Area.

Top:
The North Korean mock-up shows a very simple view of the border. It seems it was made in the 1970s. Lot of details are missing – for instance, the main South Korean building is not even included.



Bottom:
The South Korean mock-up accurately depicts the reality on the ground and is clearly up-to-date.



In North Korea, a Colonel who doesn't speak English will guide the tourists during their visit. Pictures are allowed at any time, unlike in South Korea where you must follow a strict photography protocol and even sometimes leave your camera in the bus.



In the DMZ in the North, you can see these huge billboards proclaiming that "Korea is One" and promoting Reunification.



In the South, there are no such reunification billboards but signs warning visitors about the CCTV system monitoring the area.



In Panmunjom, soldiers from the two Koreas must remain totally still when facing the other side inside the JSA.

This behavior may seem demanding but in fact, they are only here when visitors are coming. When no one is visiting, they return to their main buildings and the area is empty.



My North Korean guide told me to notice the way South Korean guards face North Korea. One was half hidden behind the blue barrack to make himself a smaller target.
"He is afraid of our soldiers..." my guide said.





When North Korean soldiers wear helmets in the DMZ, it means that they are on high military alert... It is also a psychological message meant to impress the South Koreans. SK soldiers always wear helmets. The North Korean uniforms look like they are from the 1950s – and rightly so, as the Korean People's Army was created in 1948 in the USSR occupied zone of Korea. The uniforms were copied from the Soviet ones.



Visitors on the North Korean side enter the United Nations blue barracks. The tourists are queuing in a disordered line.

On the South Korean side, you must form a perfect line, as though in a military exercise. It is absolutely prohibited to take pictures on the way.

South Korean citizens living in South Korea can visit the DMZ but they may not join the tour with foreigners due to local laws.

During my five trips to the DMZ in North Korea, I have never seen any North Korean visitors there.



Visits from the North and the South never take place at the same time inside the JSA blue barracks.

Also, you will never see soldiers from both sides at the same time there.

This means that the two sides have to coordinate the visits when they enter the blue barracks on the border. They usually use a special phone line to do so.

Inside, the huge wooden desk is exactly on the Military Demarcation Line. So, you can technically enter North Korea from the South or South Korea from the North with one small step!



A South Korean soldier inside the negotiation blue barrack. He is standing still like a wax figure. He barely even seemed to be breathing!

South Korean soldiers always wear sunglasses to avoid eye contact with the North Koreans. The JSA battalion recruits mostly volunteers. In South Korea, the military service lasts 22 months. In North Korea, there is no limit...Many defectors say they had to serve 10 years.

The American soldier who headed the tour stopped in front of him and said, *"Please do not touch him. He is a human, not a mannequin."* The visitors laughed, a strange reaction to this soldier just doing his job earnestly.

The American soldier told he chose to serve here and received only a small bonus, far from the higher salaries soldiers can get in Afghanistan or Iraq.



During the visit on the North Korean side, two North Korean soldiers remain standing in front of the gateway to South Korea, to prevent visitors from escaping!



I asked a North Korean colonel at the DMZ:

- *What happens if a South Korean citizen crosses the border at the DMZ and comes to the North?*
- *We will welcome him.*
- *And if a North Korean goes to the South?*
- *They will shoot him.*

Very few North Korean soldiers escape to the South at the DMZ – the last time it happened was in november 2017.



At the DMZ, the North Korean soldiers monitoring the border must keep their fists clenched, ready to fight like boxers, my guide told me.

On the South side, the soldiers can stand in two positions: with clenched fists like the North Koreans when they are facing them – they stand in a taekwondo position to look intimidating – or with their hands on their belt, in a more relaxed fashion, when there are no North Korean soldiers opposite them.



In North Korea, you won't have any problem taking selfies or photographs with the North Korean soldiers guiding you. It seems that is part of the tour as they always appear happy to pose and even show a lot of patience. Many times, the soldiers on the DMZ looked more like PR people than members of the military.



In South Korea, the American and South Korean soldiers won't allow you to photograph them. But they can be seen doing it themselves as evidenced in the background of the bottom picture.



On the North Korean side, soldiers enjoy posing for the tourists. This one asked for a cigarette after this photograph. On the South Korean side, you can forget about it.



On the South Korean side, you can pose in front of a giant picture of the DMZ while wearing a plastic helmet and a uniform that you can borrow free of charge.



On the North Korean side, there are no such tourist souvenirs, but posing under the portraits of the Dear Leaders – like this French tourist is doing – is a must in the DMZ.



The two Koreas have signed an armistice but not peace. North Korea likes showing the armistice agreement and claiming that they want peace and reunification. South Korea cannot act freely because they are America's puppet, they add...



In North Korea, there is a special section open to tourists which is called "The Wall."

According to North Korea, from 1977 to 1979, South Korea and the United States built a concrete wall along the DMZ. North Korea began to spread this claim after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, for its symbolic value.

The United States and South Korea have continued to deny the existence of the wall.

The American soldier I met during my visit said that there was no wall and it was just propaganda.



According to this North Korean colonel, the wall stretches more than 240 km from east to west and is 5 to 8 meter high. They just show paintings of it, not photographs.



Top:

What you can see from North Korea: a glimpse of South Korea.



Bottom:

Visitors on the South Korean side can enjoy the view of the Imjingang Bridge over the river. It is a former railroad bridge which was used by repatriated war prisoners returning from North Korea.



Top:
These are the types of products sold at the souvenir shop near the DMZ area: ginseng roots.



Bottom:
On the South Korean side, DMZ t-shirts and caps are very popular with tourists.



DMZ 파주 장단콩초콜릿
 DMZ Paju Jangdan soybean Chocolate
 DMZ坡州豆巧克力

공분율 7.95%
 순초콜릿 100g(915kcal)

DMZ 파주 장단콩초콜릿
 DMZ Paju Jangdan soybean Chocolate
 DMZ坡州豆巧克力

공분율 7.95%
 순초콜릿 100g(915kcal)

₩12000

The DMZ brand is even used to sell soybean chocolate in this South Korean store at the DMZ.



Top:

In North Korea, it is prohibited to come near the barbed wire along the border.

Bottom:

In South Korea, people hang flags and messages of peace on the barbed wire fence.

As there has been no human activity inside the DMZ since 1953, there now exists a strip of land that serves as a natural and protected area for many plant and animal species.





This North Korean colonel is gesturing toward South Korea. My American military guide stressed that I shouldn't point or make sudden moves in the direction of North Korea, "for my own safety," he said. Such gestures are prohibited in the DMZ as they may be seen as aggressive by the North Korean soldiers, who may shoot at any time.



In the 1980s, the South Korean government built a 320 feet tall flagpole in the DMZ. North Korea quickly responded by erecting a 525 feet tall one. At the time, it was the tallest in the world.

Just behind the giant North Korean flag is the "Propaganda Village." Kijong-dong looks just like an ordinary village, except that no one seems to actually live there.

In North Korea, they say that people really live there and are heroes as they have to endure the giant American loudspeakers constantly broadcasting K-pop.



One feature of the DMZ can only be visited from the South Korean side: the tunnel that North Korea dug to invade South Korea. North Korea denied building the tunnel before claiming that it was intended for coal mining.



The Third Tunnel of Aggression reaches the closest to Seoul: 44 kilometers away. It had the capacity to move some 30,000 North Korean troops per hour.



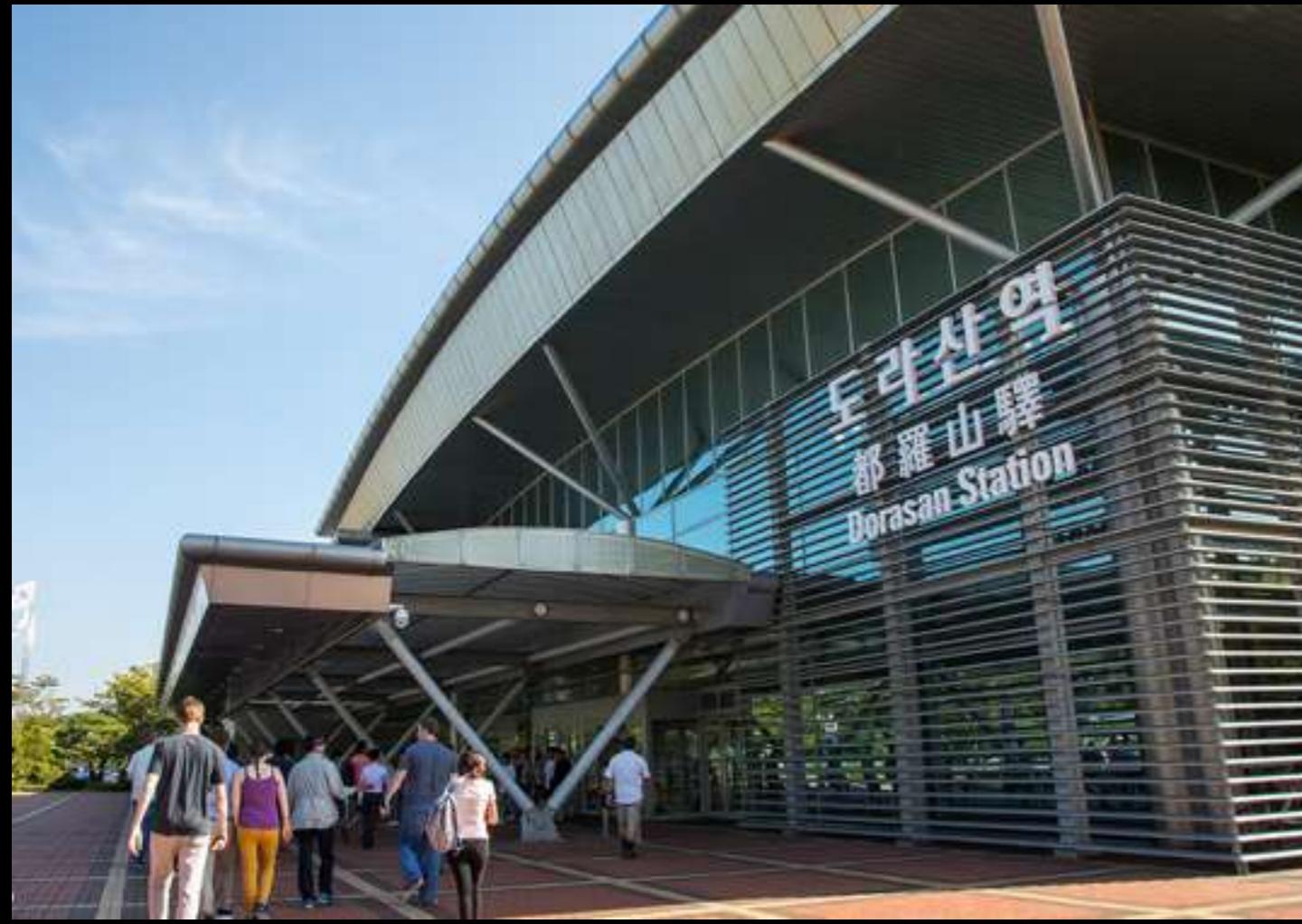
Left: In North Korea, a road sign indicating that Seoul is just 70km away from the DMZ.

Right: Another road sign on the South Korean side of the DMZ.



Top:

The Reunification train station in North Korea – brand new but no longer in use.



Bottom:

The Dorasan train station in South Korea, which used to be connected to North Korea.

The only way to enter North Korea by train now is through China.

One day, if reunification takes place, the trains in this station will take you to Pyongyang in the North.



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