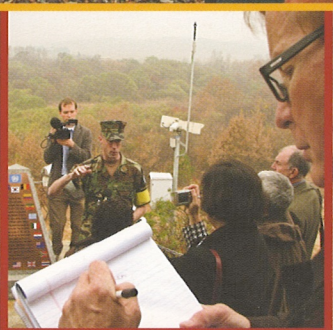
Crossing the Divide

2007-08 IRP Gatekeeper Editors Cover the Two Koreas



INTERNATIONAL REPORTING PROJECT

Exploring a Divided Peninsula

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For many correspondents based in Asia — most of them in Beijing, Shanghai or Tokyo — Korea has often been an afterthought, a way station between China and Japan.

The November 2007 IRP gatekeeper trip to South Korea – with its brief foray into the North — allowed U.S. editors to experience Korea in depth, to learn about its distinctive culture and to explore the long and complex relationship of the two Koreas with each other and the United States.

For more than half a century, the defining drama for both Koreas has been the sporadic effort to reunify the divided North and South, by violence or persuasion. The IRP Gatekeepers met with Korean officials and people from various walks of life, exploring progress toward this daunting goal, attitudes regarding reunification and the difficulties of talks aimed at persuading North Korea to abandon its nuclear weapons program.

Gatekeepers listened to the varying and often sharply different perspectives on the U.S. held by representatives of three generations: those who lived through the Korean War and saw the Americans as liberators; Koreans of the 1980's who struggled for democracy against U.S.-backed military dictatorships, and today's young people who seek to study in the United States but are critical of its policies. The 28,000 U.S. soldiers stationed in South Korea represent the largest U.S. military force in Asia. The editors met some of those soldiers who patrolled the DMZ, heard about future plans to redeploy the U.S. military and listened to Korean arguments for and against continuing the American military presence.

Besides gaining a more nuanced understanding of U.S. policy in the region, the Gatekeepers learned more about conditions of daily life in the reclusive North and about the North's tentative experiments with capitalism, coaxed by South Korea's conciliatory and financially generous "sunshine policy." The editors' visit to North Korea's Kumgang mountain resort provided a vivid demonstration of the contradictions and paradoxes contained in this approach. Editors also spoke to young North Korean defectors who had fled their country in the last few years and hope to play a role in any post-Communist era, and to experts who have studied and traveled in the North for decades.

Louise Lief at the DMZ

Equally important, the IRP Gatekeepers got a first-hand look at South Korea's spectacular economic and developmental success story. The South's leap from a poor peasant economy with a per capita income of $79 in 1960 to the world's eleventh largest economy and its status as the most "wired" country on the planet today holds lessons for other countries hoping for similar results. The editors met former president Kim Dae Jung, an iconic figure in the South's transformation from military dictatorship to vibrant democracy and the Nobel Prize-winning architect of the "sunshine policy."

The editors also got a taste of the religious and cultural traditions that have animated so much of Korean life, spending a night in a Buddhist monastery in the mountains, and seeing fervent Christian faith and missionary zeal at one of Seoul's largest churches.

Having seen for themselves South Korea's national obsession with education, its superb infrastructure and its fiercely competitive companies, the Gatekeepers left Korea with a sense of the formidable challenges the U.S. economy and their own communities will face in the globalized marketplace. One of the participants in the trip, Michael Mosettig, senior producer for foreign affairs at *The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer,* says his mantra to young Americans now is: "Study hard and watch out, because there are people out there who are going to eat your lunch." ★