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Imagination and the Korean crisis

Roland Bleiker

When developing the concept of the 'strategic imagination', Brendan Sargeant had in mind the challenge of dealing with seemingly intractable conflicts.¹ Perhaps more importantly, he had in mind challenging strategic policy approaches that are so dominant and so entrenched that they are no longer able to offer innovative ways of understanding and dealing with these intractable conflicts. Or at least this is how I interpret Sargeant's call for a theory of the imagination: as a scholarly and practical call for innovative solutions in strategic thinking and defence policy.

This chapter illustrates how aesthetic approaches to security can offer such a form of strategic imagination. At first sight, this seems far fetched. Aesthetic approaches tend to be associated with art and literature and the kind of 'soft' humanities inquiries that are worlds away from the real and 'hard' world of security and defence policy. Not so, I argue. Aesthetics can be defined in a much broader manner in a way that is inherently political. It refers not only to practices of art—from painting to music, poetry, photography and film—but also, and above all, to the type of insights and understandings they inspire and engender. Aesthetics in this sense is about the ability to step

1 This research was supported by the Core University Program for Korean Studies of the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Korea and the Korean Studies Promotion Service at the Academy of Korean Studies (AKS-2021-OLU-2250002). I am grateful to Dhruba Adhikari for valuable research assistance. I am also grateful to Andrew Carr and an anonymous referee for insightful feedback that helped me revise the chapter.

back, reflect and see strategic dilemmas and policies in a new way. It is about cultivating an open-ended level of sensibility about the political.² Once we do this, we might be able to recognise and address issues and problems that we otherwise cannot even see, such as security threats that have not been part of traditional defence thinking. This includes—to mention an obvious and well-recognised example—the strategic challenges that Australia and other nations face in relation to climate change.³

I demonstrate that aesthetic approaches can generate the type of imagination that Sargeant had in mind. I do so with a sceptical social science reader or defence policy expert in mind. Such a reader would normally expect that research should be evaluated based on the empirical validity of the results that are generated. Instead, I show that research that draws on the ‘strategic imagination’ can be evaluated in alternative ways. Rather than relying on predetermined social science criteria, the usefulness of scholarly insights can also be evaluated based on how they help us see old security problems in a new light. Making this claim is not necessarily controversial. Scholars have long argued that alternative knowledge practices, such as those linked to aesthetic insights, ‘cannot always be verified by methodological means proper to science’.⁴

I empirically illustrate the usefulness of the strategic imagination by showing how visual autoethnography can reveal new and potentially useful insights into one of the most protracted conflicts in the world today: the one that has dominated the Korean Peninsula for more than half a century.

2 For definitions of aesthetics and discussions of its implications for politics and security policy, see, for instance, Franklin R. Ankersmit, *Aesthetic Politics: Political Philosophy beyond Fact and Value* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996); Roland Bleiker, *Aesthetics and World Politics* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), doi.org/10.1057/9780230244375; Roland Bleiker, ‘Seeing beyond Disciplines: Aesthetic Creativity in International Theory’, *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 75, no. 5 (2021): 573–90, doi.org/10.1080/10357718.2021.1992129; Aida A. Hozic, ‘Introduction: The Aesthetic Turn at 15’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 45, no. 2 (2017): 201–5, doi.org/10.1177/0305829816684253.

3 Brendan Sargeant, *The Implications of Climate Change for Australian Strategic and Defence Policy in Relation to the Alliance and Pacific Island States*, Regional Outlook Paper No. 68 (Brisbane: Griffith Asia Institute, Griffith University, 2021), 1–17, www.griffith.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0027/1407447/RO68-Sargeant-web.pdf.

4 Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd edn (London: Sheed & Ward, 1979), xxii–xxiii.

Autoethnography is an approach that breaks with convention by drawing on an author's own experiences to reimagine the world. Visual autoethnography uses photographs to do so. It is part of a long scholarly tradition that highlights the importance of visuality to how politics, including strategic issues, is seen, understood, conceptualised and implemented.⁵

I draw on my experiences working in the Korean Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), where I was stationed as a Swiss Army officer between 1986 and 1988. I employ my own photographs to examine how an appreciation of everyday aesthetic sensibilities can open new ways of thinking about security dilemmas. In so doing, I draw and expand on research I have conducted on this topic over the past couple of decades.⁶

The key argument I advance is that visual autoethnography as a form of strategic imagination can be insightful not because it offers better or even authentic views—it cannot—but because it has the potential to reveal how prevailing political discourses and practices are so entrenched that we no longer see their partial, political and often problematic nature. First, I show how a self-reflective engagement with my own photographs of the DMZ reveals the deeply entrenched role of militarised masculinities that transgress the border and shape security policies on both sides. When I first took my photographs three decades ago, I noticed everything about the DMZ except its strikingly gendered nature. As a military officer, and having grown up in a patriarchal society, I simply took for granted and accepted the militarised and gendered value system that surrounded me. This was the case in Switzerland but also when I arrived in the Korean DMZ. A self-critical look at my own positionality and my changing relationship to my own photographs over a period of three decades reveals how deeply entrenched militarised approaches to Korean security are and how much they are implicated in the conflict itself. Employing the strategic imagination would entail identifying the problematic aspects of these security patterns and looking for innovative solutions beyond them.

5 I have elaborated in detail on the definitions and relevance of autoethnography and visuality in previous works, including Morgan Brigg and Roland Bleiker, 'Autoethnographic International Relations: Exploring the Self as a Source of Knowledge', *Review of International Studies* 36, no. 3 (2010): 779–98, doi.org/10.1017/S0260210510000689; Roland Bleiker, ed., *Visual Global Politics* (London: Routledge, 2018), doi.org/10.4324/9781315856506.

6 Roland Bleiker, 'A Rogue Is a Rogue Is a Rogue: US Foreign Policy and the Korean Nuclear Crisis', *International Affairs* 79, no. 4 (2003): 719–37, doi.org/10.1111/1468-2346.00333; Roland Bleiker, *Divided Korea: Toward a Culture of Reconciliation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005); Roland Bleiker, 'Visual Autoethnography and International Security: Insights from the Korean DMZ', *European Journal of International Security* 4, no. 3 (2019): 274–99, doi.org/10.1017/eis.2019.14.

Second, I reflect on my photographs of everyday life in North Korea. I show how and why it is impossible to see the Korean conflict in neutral ways. Drawing on my positionality and photographs, I then reveal a reality that is different from prevailing strategic and public discourses, which depict North Korea as a grim and authoritarian state, solely responsible for the recurring nuclear crises that destabilise the region. I do not deny the massive human rights abuses that take place in the North or trivialise Pyongyang's nuclear program, but my photographs, subjective as they are, show that life in North Korea is far more complex and diverse. They also show that demonising North Korea as an irrational rogue state hinders our opportunity to understand why Pyongyang acts the way it does. Here, the strategic imagination would seek to comprehend what the world looks like from North Korea in an attempt to develop more effective security policies and diplomatic initiatives.

The need to rethink the protracted conflict on the Korean Peninsula

It is hard to find a protracted conflict that is more in need of strategic imagination than the one on the Korean Peninsula. Defence policies in and towards the two Koreas call precisely for what Sargeant advocated repeatedly: a 'larger conception of strategy, a richer discourse and a more searching questioning' that can help develop innovative policies and defence strategies.⁷

More than 70 years after the Korean War, the peninsula remains caught in an anachronistic Cold War stalemate. The spectre of war is never far away. At regular intervals there are major crises—often triggered by North Korea's nuclear ambition—that bring the region and the world to the brink of catastrophe. Not long ago, then US president Donald Trump publicly vowed to 'totally destroy' North Korea, before suddenly reversing course and adopting a more conciliatory stance.⁸ Such crisis-détente cycles have taken place many times before without substantial changes to the dangerous security dilemmas that drive them.

7 Brendan Sargeant, 'Challenges to the Australian Strategic Imagination', *Australian Journal of Defence and Strategic Studies* 4, no. 1 (2022), 8.

8 Donald Trump, 'Remarks by President Trump to the 72nd Session of the United Nations General Assembly', New York, 19 September 2017, trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-72nd-session-united-nations-general-assembly/.

Prevailing strategic approaches to security on the Korean Peninsula—by South Korea, the United States and other major powers—have had no success in solving the recurring nuclear crises or forcing regime change in the reclusive and autocratic North. Based primarily on military threats and economic sanctions, these strategic approaches often reinforced North Korea's nuclear ambition and further strengthened the authoritarian regime.

Today, the situation is as tense and as dangerous as ever. Recent scholarly literature on North Korea suggests that the peninsula will likely remain a highly volatile region that poses significant security risks. Sue Mi Terry, for instance, highlights that North Korea possesses the capability to launch nuclear attacks on US territory.⁹ She and other analysts believe that North Korea is unlikely to give up its nuclear arsenal as this is the very base of the regime's survival. Nuclear weapons are for North Korea a 'military asset, an insurance policy, and a vast source of prestige all in one'.¹⁰

Many other scholars agree with this pessimistic outlook that identifies North Korea's nuclear ambition as the source of continuing tension. Jung H. Pak thinks North Korea's leader, Kim Jong-un, does not want a normal international security environment.¹¹ Instead, the hostile international environment serves his purposes well as it allows him to blame the United States and its allies for the country's economic hardship. His regime 'requires a hostile outside world to justify its diversion of scarce resources into military programs' to legitimise the mythical image of the Kim dynasty as the saviour of the North Korean nation.¹² This is why Pak advises the United States and its allies to aim for nothing less than the complete nuclear disarmament of North Korea. He stresses that 'the United States and its regional allies must undertake coordinated and consistent actions to convince [Kim Jong-un] that nuclear weapons make his survival less, rather than more, secure'.¹³ But complete disarmament is unlikely to take place, in the opinion of many

9 Sue Mi Terry, 'North Korea's Nuclear Family', *Foreign Affairs*, September–October 2021: 115–20; see also Jaganath Sankaran and Steve Fetter, 'Defending the United States: Revisiting National Missile Defense against North Korea', *International Security* 46, no. 3 (2022): 51–86, doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00426.

10 Terry, 'North Korea's Nuclear Family', 117.

11 Jung H. Pak, 'What Kim Wants', *Foreign Affairs*, May–June 2020: 96–100.

12 *ibid.*, 100.

13 *ibid.*, 104. See also Kelsey Davenport, 'Orchestrating US Engagement with North Korea', *Survival* 64, no. 2 (2022): 125–40, doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2022.2055831; Ian Campbell and Michaela Dodge, 'Deterring North Korea', *Survival* 62, no. 1 (2020): 55–59, doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2020.1715065; Victor Cha and Katrin Fraser Katz, 'The Right Way to Coerce North Korea: Ending the Threat without Going to War', *Foreign Affairs* 97, no. 3 (2018): 87–100.

leading defence analysts. Toby Dalton and Jina Kim argue that the only way North Korea can be disarmed is through military action, but that is no longer a viable option.¹⁴ Andrei Lankov, likewise, explains why North Korea's elite needs nuclear weapons and, as a result, is reluctant to embrace even Chinese-style reform.¹⁵ North Korea's elite, Lankov stresses, will never voluntarily denuclearise because nuclear weapons are what allow them to keep at bay a hostile United States and its allies. The nuclear weapons are, in this way, a guarantee of the survival of both the current regime and its political elite.¹⁶

Introducing visual autoethnography as a method to review and rethink security

The protracted conflict on the Korean Peninsula is precisely one of those situations that beg the questions Sargeant¹⁷ asked: How is it possible that so little has changed over so many years? Why have prevailing approaches to strategy and security not been able to find—and enforce—a lasting solution to the conflict? I now seek to show that strategic imagination can offer innovative ways of understanding and potentially approaching the security situation on the Korean Peninsula. Using what could be called 'visual autoethnography', I try to rethink Korean security dilemmas by reflecting on my own experience and drawing on photographs I took while in the Korean DMZ and travelling back and forth between South and North Korea.

14 Toby Dalton and Jina Kim, 'Rethinking Arms Control with a Nuclear North Korea', *Survival* 65, no. 1 (2023): 21–48, doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2023.2172847.

15 Andrei Lankov, 'The Perspective from Pyongyang: Limits of Compromise', *Survival* 63, no. 6 (2021): 107–18, doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2021.2006447.

16 *ibid.*, 111; Edward Howell, 'The *Juche* H-Bomb? North Korea, Nuclear Weapons and Regime-State Survival', *International Affairs* 96, no. 4 (2020): 1051–68, doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiz253; Andrei Lankov, 'The Survival Strategies of the North Korean Elite', *Russian Politics & Law* 58, nos 3–4 (2021): 173–92, doi.org/10.1080/10611940.2022.2111940.

17 Chapter 2, this volume.



Plate 10.1 The author with North Korean officers, Panmungak, Joint Security Area, Panmunjom, 1986–88

Photo: Roland Bleiker.



Plate 10.2 The author with South Korean officers, Seoul, 1986–88

Photo: Roland Bleiker.

Between 1986 and 1988 I worked as a young Swiss Army officer in the Korean DMZ. I was chief of office of the Swiss delegation to the Neutral Nations Supervisory Commission (NNSC), which was established with the Armistice Agreement in July 1953 and was meant to supervise two clauses in the agreement that prohibited the introduction of new military personnel and weapons. The commission's neutrality was based on each side choosing two nations that did not actively participate in the war. The North opted for what was then Czechoslovakia and Poland. Switzerland and Sweden were selected by the South, formally represented by the United Nations Command. With the intensification of the Cold War, the idea of retaining current levels of military personnel and equipment became a farce. With its official purpose gone, the NNSC radically shrunk. By the time I arrived in 1986, the Swiss delegation consisted of only six people and its real purpose was informal: to establish links across the DMZ at a time when there were few meaningful interactions between North and South.

Being able to cross the otherwise hermetically sealed DMZ and travel back and forth between North and South was a rare privilege. At the time, the NNSC members were among the very few able to do so. Even today, the DMZ remains tightly sealed, so much so that crossing to the other side is still, as Suk-Young Kim points out, 'a high-stakes performative act'.¹⁸

Equally unique is the location of the commission where I worked and lived: the so-called Joint Security Area (JSA) in the border village of Panmunjom. It is where the armistice was negotiated and is the only place in the DMZ where the North Korean and South Korean soldiers face each other daily. The dividing line cuts right through a series of buildings, where the occasional meeting is held. Observation posts on either side are permanently guarded to try to carefully survey every move by the other side. The DMZ, however, is not a location or even a straight line. It is a 4-kilometre-wide and 250-kilometre-long buffer zone: a complex 'interface' where political, ideological, economic, geopolitical and military interests overlap and clash in ways that are both intranational and international.¹⁹

The DMZ is also a symbolic marker of the conflict and, as such, both represents and influences political dynamics. Press coverage of the conflict is often accompanied by photographs or films of the DMZ. But very few people have seen and experienced the DMZ, for it is largely off-limits to civilians on both sides. There are tourist trips to the DMZ, but they are limited, tightly controlled and carefully staged. As a result, and as Suk-Young Kim points out, 'most Koreans encounter the DMZ not as an actual physical space, but through mediated images: photographs, films and videos'.²⁰

18 Suk-Young Kim, 'Staging the "Cartography of Paradox": The DMZ Special Exhibition at the Korean War Memorial, Seoul', *Theatre Journal* 63, no. 3 (2011): 381–402, at 383, doi.org/10.1353/tj.2011.0083.

19 Valérie Gelézeau, Koen De Ceuster, and Alain Delissen, eds, *De-Bordering Korea: Tangible and Intangible Legacies of the Sunshine Policy* (London: Routledge, 2013), 7–8, doi.org/10.4324/9780203084571.

20 Kim, 'Staging the "Cartography of Paradox"', 386.



Plate 10.3 South Korean soldier facing the military demarcation line, 1986–88

Photo: Roland Bleiker.



Plate 10.4 Military demarcation line inside the DMZ, 1986–88

Photo: Roland Bleiker.

I now use my photographs from life inside the DMZ, and from regular visits to North Korea, to attempt to offer different perspectives of the peninsula's security issues. I would like to stress upfront that I am in no way suggesting that my photographs offer unique insights or perspectives that are more authentic than those we see from prevailing press coverage. Rather, I use my photographs as tools to re-view, re-evaluate and reimagine the world. If they are representative, it is only of my positionality and of how self-reflective ruminations about this positionality can reveal existing political discourses and the power relationships they embody. In this sense, my photographs illustrate the situatedness of knowledge and, in so doing, are illustrations that stand in a conversation with the text that surrounds them. Visual autoethnography is, in short, an ongoing reflective process that uses positionality to reveal the often arbitrary but largely concealed construction of political discourses and practices.

The Korean strategic imagination I: Exposing militarised masculinities through visual self-reflection

The first autoethnographic insight I would like to highlight has to do with the militarised nature of the so-called demilitarised zone. The border between North and South Korea is often characterised as 'the most fortified area in the world'.²¹ The ensuing security dilemmas are so deeply entrenched that any lasting solution cannot be found through prevailing strategic policies since they have constituted and are an inevitable part of the existing dangerous stalemate. An innovative way forward requires what Sargeant advocated in numerous policy settings: a 'reimagining of the role of strategic and defence policy'.²²

21 Rachel Lee, 'UNC Allows Heavy Weapons in DMZ', *Korea Times*, 7 October 2016, www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2016/07/205_209010.html.

22 Sargeant, *The Implications of Climate Change*, 14.



Plates 10.5 and 10.6 'Northern' and 'Southern' soldiers in the JSA, Panmunjom, 1986–88

Photos: Roland Bleiker.

Militarism cuts right across the hermetically sealed dividing line. Consider, as a visual example, the Joint Security Area where the border runs through shared buildings and where North and South Korean troops face each other eye to eye. Military marching formations and salutes take on an explicitly performative dimension here as they are staged primarily for the other side to see. Look at Plates 10.5 and 10.6: insiders to the conflict can right away see a clash between two antagonistic and completely different worlds, epitomised by North and South, here represented by the US-led UN Command. But from a distance one can see more similarities than differences between these political enemies. All are soldiers marching in uniform and performing the same militarised ritual.

One key point struck me when I went through my hundreds of photographs of the DMZ: the almost complete absence of women. As a feminist scholar, I look at my photographs from back then and am stunned. There are only men in my photographs. There are South Korean men, North Korean men, Chinese men. There are Czech, Polish, Swedish and Swiss men. There are American men.

I had a hard time finding any photographs that feature women. One of the few I found was from a UN Command Military Armistice Commission meeting. Discontinued in the early 1990s, these meetings took place inside the barracks of the JSA, where the two sides met across the table from each other. The meetings rarely amounted to more than an exchange of prepared statements in which each side accused the other of violating the armistice. The meetings, too, were part of a militaristic performance and, as a result, were staged to a limited number of military personnel, press and other observers.

Plate 10.7 shows military personnel looking in on the ‘negotiations’, with US (UN Command) soldiers in the foreground and North Koreans in the background. The photograph sticks out because it is one of the very few featuring a woman. She is looking not at the meeting room but across the border to the northern side. I wonder what she thought while surveying this all-male world.



Plate 10.7 Meeting of the Military Armistice Commission, JSA, Panmunjom, 1986–88

Photo: Roland Bleiker.

On some level my observations are not surprising. Of course, one would expect soldiers in a militarised zone and, of course, one would expect that most, if not all, are men. The surprising observation, and the significance of visual autoethnography, has to do with my own experience and my changing relationship to the photographs I took more than three decades ago.

When I first arrived in the DMZ in 1986, I noticed everything except the absence of women and the gendered nature of the place. When settling into the JSA and crossing back and forth between South and North, I was struck by many of the things I saw: the stark political differences, the ideological hatred, the cultural diversity, but not the most obvious feature—the absence of women. I took this for granted. All my colleagues in the NNSC were men. All the soldiers and officers with whom I interacted were men, no matter on which side of the dividing line they were. It seemed normal to me, in part because I was in a military setting, in part because I grew up in a very patriarchal society, Switzerland, where women were granted the vote only when I was 11 years old, with some cantons holding out until well into my adulthood. I was conditioned by the environment in which I grew up. I was drafted into the army at 18 and, in an all-male environment, was trained how to march, salute, fire a gun, throw a hand-grenade and drive a tank. I was taught how to execute and obey orders, but not how to think critically, and

particularly not about gender issues. Militarised values had been normalised and I accepted them as common sense without questioning—or even being aware of—the political values they entailed.

I now look back in bewilderment at my inability to see the obvious: the highly gendered nature of politics in the DMZ. This is precisely where the links between power and militarisation are at their most effective: in the construction of common sense, in societal discourse that defines what is accepted as normal and not, even if this construction is based on highly partial, exploitative and problematic foundations.²³

This is also where visual autoethnography can provide political insights: in self-reflective accounts of our own experiences, including how our own views change in relation to visual representations of these experiences. It is, indeed, the confrontation with visual evidence that made me realise most acutely how my own positionality reflected political dynamics that were so naturalised for me—and I presume for many men around me—that I did not even recognise them. The fact that three decades had passed since I took the photographs adds to, rather than subtracts from, the potential of visual autoethnography. It is, in fact, the elapsed time that provides the opportunity of insight, for it is the changing relationship between me and my photographs that reveals the power of discourse to construct and mask power relations.



Plate 10.8 Flying in a US Army helicopter

Photos: Roland Bleiker.

23 Linda Åhäll, 'The Dance of Militarisation: A Feminist Security Studies Take on "the Political"', *Critical Studies on Security* 4, no. 2 (2016): 154–68, at 155, doi.org/10.1080/21624887.2016.1153933.



Plate 10.9 From inside a US Army helicopter, south of the DMZ

Photos: Roland Bleiker.

My experiences and my relationship with my own photographs show how and why the political consequences of the gendered and militarised nature of the DMZ go far beyond the immediate and obvious: men in uniforms, surveillance installations, barbed wire. Militarised masculinities are part of broader societal values. They shape collective attitudes and policy formation.²⁴ In the two Koreas, they reach far beyond the DMZ. They can be seen, for instance, in clusters of prostitution that pop up around US military bases in the South or in how military personnel interact in a more general way with the civilian population on both sides.²⁵ My entire experience in Korea was gendered, revealing what feminist scholars such as Linda Åhäll, Laura Shepherd and Annick Wibben have pointed out for so long: the need to theorise how militarised masculinities permeate all aspects of society, from the every day to foreign policy. They are located and gain key political significance in the clothes we wear, the films we watch, the national anthems we rehearse and the security policies we deem urgent and compelling.²⁶ It is in this way that militaristic values become, as Sargeant pointed out, about far more than defence policy: they are at the core of how national identity is constructed.²⁷

Militaristic ways of thinking become elevated as the primary and seemingly most reasonable and compelling manner to address security issues. The result is that certain individuals and the values they espouse are given

24 Cynthia H. Enloe, *Maneuvers: The International Politics of Militarizing Women's Lives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 1–34, 289, doi.org/10.1525/9780520923744.

25 See, for instance, Katharine H.S. Moon, *Sex among Allies: Military Prostitution in US–Korea Relations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997); Grace M. Cho, *Haunting the Korean Diaspora: Shame, Secrecy, and the Forgotten War* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008). For North Korean context, see Sandra Fahy, *Marching through Suffering: Loss and Survival in North Korea* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), doi.org/10.7312/columbia/9780231171342.001.0001.

26 Åhäll, 'The Dance of Militarisation', 165; Laura J. Shepherd, 'Militarisation', in *Visual Global Politics*, edited by B. Roland (London: Routledge, 2018), 209–14, doi.org/10.4324/9781315856506-31; Annick T.R. Wibben, 'Why We Need to Study (US) Militarism: A Critical Feminist Lens', *Security Dialogue* 49, nos 1–2 (2018): 136–48, doi.org/10.1177/0967010617742006; Anna Stavrianakis, Jan Selby, and Iraklis Oikonomou, *Militarism and International Relations* (London: Routledge, 2012), 1–18, doi.org/10.4324/9780203101476; Anna Stavrianakis and Maria Stern, 'Militarism and Security: Dialogue, Possibilities and Limits', *Security Dialogue* 49, nos 1–2 (2018): 3–18, at 4, doi.org/10.1177/0967010617748528; Bryan Mabee and Srdjan Vucetic, 'Varieties of Militarism: Towards a Typology', *Security Dialogue* 49, nos 1–2 (2018): 96–108, at 97, 99–103, doi.org/10.1177/0967010617730948.

27 Sargeant, Chapter 2, this volume. For the classical text on this topic, see David Campbell, *Writing Security: United States Foreign Policy and the Politics of Identity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992).

greater authority to comment on—and make decisions about—questions of national security. This hinders both adequate scholarly understanding and the search for innovative policy solutions.²⁸

The power to elevate militarism as the most logical and compelling way to understand and solve security issues is particularly pronounced in the Koreas. Both sides analyse the conflict in strikingly similar militaristic terms, even though they assign blame in opposing ways. Militaristic values also permeate the search for solutions, to the point where it is difficult to break out of a cycle of violence in which threats and counterthreats produce ever more dangerous standoffs. Solutions to the conflict that are not based on a tough defence posture tend to be dismissed as well intentioned and naive at best, and ethically problematic and dangerous at worst.²⁹ This is why challenging the prevailing militarised approach to strategy is difficult and rare. One of the exceptions is the women's movement in South Korea, which critiques entrenched practices of militarism both within South Korea and in its relationship with the United States.³⁰ But these and other dissident movements function at the margins of society and have not yet had a substantial influence on military policy and diplomatic negotiations.

The strategic imagination II: Seeing beyond prevailing security narratives

The second illustration of the power of visual autoethnography revolves around photographs I have taken during my many visits to North Korea. I would like to flag again, and upfront, that I am in no way trying to claim that these photographs offer authentic insights into a 'true' North

28 Aaron Belkin, *Bring Me Men: Military Masculinity and the Benign Facade of American Empire, 1898–2001* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 4; Åhäll, 'The Dance of Militarisation', 160; see also Linda Åhäll and Laura J. Shepherd, *Gender, Agency and Political Violence* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 155.

29 For a highly compelling and classical account of how militarised approaches to security frame politics in particular ways, see Carol Cohn, 'Sex and Death in the Rational World of Defense Intellectuals', *Signs* 12, no. 4 (1987): 687–718, doi.org/10.1086/494362. See also Belkin, *Bring Me Men*, 4–5.

30 Young-Ju Hoang and Noël O'Sullivan, 'Gendered Militarisation as State of Exception on the Korean Peninsula', *Third World Thematics: A TWQ Journal* 3, no. 2 (2018): 164–78, doi.org/10.1080/23802014.2018.1471359; Belkin, *Bring Me Men*, 47–76; Ihntaek Hwang, 'Militarising National Security through Criminalisation of Conscientious Objectors to Conscription in South Korea', *Critical Studies on Security* 6, no. 3 (2018): 296–311, doi.org/10.1080/21624887.2018.1424986.

Korea. Rather, they seek to highlight what Sargeant stressed: that ‘any representation is partial’ and the work of the imagination is precisely to expose and challenge this partiality.³¹



Plate 10.10 Man next to Kim Il-sung statue, Kaesong, North Korea, 1986–88

Photo: Roland Bleiker.

31 Sargeant, Chapter 2, this volume.



Plate 10.11 Hotel in Pyongyang, 1986–88

Photo: Roland Bleiker.

At first sight, the photos I have taken of North Korea very much reflect the dominant Western narrative of the country. There are lots of photographs of gargantuan statues and towers. Then there was the personality cult around the country's first leader, Kim Il-sung, which permeated all aspects of life, visually and verbally. Most rooms had a portrait of Kim and everything revolved around him.

Other photographs show extreme hardship: roads being built quite literally by hand by thousands of workers; assault tanks were the only machinery available to flatten the road. Big banners and loudspeakers would fire up the workers, who laboured away, often in extreme, sub-zero temperatures. This personal photographic evidence is, of course, amplified by what we know happens behind what is visible: the exceptionally ruthless treatment of anyone dissenting with the regime; the horrifying 'gulags' that are documented by accounts from defectors.³²

32 Examples here include Barbara Demick, *Nothing to Envy: Real Lives in North Korea* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2009); Daniel Tudor, *Ask a North Korean: Defectors Talk about Their Lives Inside the World's Most Secretive Nation* (North Clarendon: Tuttle Publishing, 2018); Chol-hwan Kang and Pierre Rigoulot, *The Aquariums of Pyongyang: Ten Years in the North Korean Gulag* (New York: Basic Books, 2005); Jang Jin-sung, *Dear Leader* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2015); Blaine Harden, *Escape from Camp 14: One Man's Remarkable Odyssey from North Korea to Freedom in the West* (New York: Penguin Books, 2013); Yeonmi Park, *In Order to Live* (New York: Penguin Books, 2015).



Plate 10.12 Woman collecting herbs in Pyongyang, 1986–88

Photo: Roland Bleiker.



Plate 10.13 Urban scene in Pyongyang, 1986–88

Photo: Roland Bleiker.

What we see here is one of the most authoritarian societies on Earth, a dysfunctional and irrational regime that revolves around a personality cult and an anachronistic communist ideology of self-reliance known as *Juche*. Massive human rights violations are part of this view, as is shocking economic mismanagement. North Korea here is the exception in a region that, over the past decades, has steadily reduced instances of mass atrocities and moved towards democracy and economic development.

This prevailing vision is perfectly captured by one of the most influential photographic essays of North Korea, entitled 'The Land of No Smiles'. Published by *Foreign Policy*, it features the work of Tomas van Houtryve.³³ David Shim puts this photographic essay in the context of broader visualisations of North Korea and highlights a prominent theme: the depiction of a country inhabited 'solely by distress, depression and desperation', a place without 'happy and cheerful people'.³⁴

While confirming prevailing perceptions of North Korea, my visual autoethnography also challenges this dominant narrative. When I look at my photographs, I see far more than a grey and grim land of no smiles. Yes, there was poverty and oppression and despair. There are also a lot of smiles in my photographs: people going about their everyday life, including with seeming joy. Some of these smiles were staged, but many were not.

My photographs of North Korea, subjective as they are, reveal how the prevailing visual narratives of the North—which see it only as a grim and grey land of no smiles—are partial and biased. I do not claim that my photographs offer a more authentic take on North Korea. They do not. They inevitably reflect my experience and my aesthetic choices as a photographer. But my photographs, and the positionality they embody, nevertheless reveal something that is of political significance: both prevailing discourses about North Korea are selective and they are highly political in their selectivity. These discourses reflect the political positions they embody and, in so doing, say as much about the values of the viewers as they do about what is visualised: life in North Korea.

33 Tomas van Houtryve, 'The Land of No Smiles', *Foreign Policy* 172 (2009): 106–13.

34 David Shim, *Visual Politics and North Korea: Seeing Is Believing* (London: Routledge, 2013), 65, doi.org/10.4324/9780203746479; see also Shine Choi, *Re-Imagining North Korea in International Politics: Problems and Alternatives* (London: Routledge, 2015), 96–134, doi.org/10.4324/9781315761541.



Plate 10.14 'The Land of No Smiles I', Man'gyŏngdae, North Korea, 1986–88

Photo: Roland Bleiker.



Plate 10.15 'The Land of No-Smiles II', 1986–88

Photo: Roland Bleiker.

Significant consequences follow from recognising that prevailing visualisations of North Korea are partial. Images frame the world and, in so doing, circumvent not only what is being seen, but also how we—as a collective—perceive an issue and view it politically. Visuals construct common sense: they provide us with a view of the world that eventually becomes so accepted and self-evident that its arbitrary origins are no longer recognised.

The image of North Korea as a rogue state is so entrenched that we cannot see anything else: ‘a rogue is a rogue is a rogue’, as I put it a while ago. North Korea is, in short, the ultimate ‘other’: the communist and authoritarian state that defies the sociopolitical logic of the international liberal order, which stands still even after the collapse of the Soviet Union and even after other communist states such as China and Vietnam introduced major economic and political changes. Consider the main slogan rehearsed by US or South Korean troops in the DMZ: the notion that ‘we’ are ‘forever in front of them all’, defending freedom against the threat of evil communism north of the dividing line.



Plate 10.16 ‘Forever in front of them all’, Camp Bonifas, UN Command, DMZ, 1986–88

Photo: Roland Bleiker.

This political and visual depiction of North Korea stubbornly persists, even in the face of contrary evidence. And such evidence abounds. These studies document, for instance, that everyday life in North Korea is far more complex than commonly assumed.³⁵ There are also studies that show how North Korea has acted largely in a rational and predictable manner. It might be an authoritarian relic of the past, but the mere fact that the country has survived against all the odds—a small and poor country surrounded by a hostile world—is testimony of how successful its leaders have been in manipulating larger players in international politics.³⁶ Despite this evidence, the prevailing stereotype of North Korea largely persists: that of an irrational, unpredictable and mad country. Mainstream press coverage commonly presents North Korea's leader, Kim Jong-un, as 'an unpredictable, unknown quantity capable of lashing out at other countries without reason'.³⁷

Understanding Pyongyang's policy decisions as rational is not to deny that nuclear proliferation is a great danger and a major security problem in the region. Nor is it to justify the country's human rights violations. But appreciating alternative vantage points can help to both understand and predict North Korean behaviour. It might also be a way to find new solutions to entrenched political dilemmas. One can agree or disagree with North Korea's dramatic brinkmanship tactics, but one cannot ignore its deeply entrenched existence. Doing so could lead to dangerous miscalculations. At a minimum, it prevents us from recognising how Pyongyang could be using its last bargaining chip, its nuclear potential, as a way of entering dialogue with the United States and other key states. But despite numerous and obvious signs, and despite detailed and insightful studies of North Korea's previous negotiating behaviour, most Western decision-makers repeat the same mistakes they committed in the past: they believe that by demonising North Korea as an evil rogue state they can force Pyongyang into concessions. The result is not a solution to the conflict but a further escalation of threats and counterthreats.

35 Choi, *Re-Imagining North Korea in International Politics*, 13; Andrei Lankov, *The Real North Korea: Life and Politics in the Failed Stalinist Utopia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Patrick McEachern, *Inside the Red Box: North Korea's Post-Totalitarian Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), doi.org/10.7312/mcea15322; Suk-Young Kim, *Illusive Utopia: Theater, Film, and Everyday Performance in North Korea* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010); Demick, *Nothing to Envy*.

36 Lankov, *The Real North Korea*, xi. Two earlier studies making a similar point are Scott Snyder, *Negotiating on the Edge: North Korean Negotiating Behavior* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 1999); and Leon V. Sigal, *Disarming Strangers: Nuclear Diplomacy with North Korea* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), doi.org/10.1515/9781400822355.

37 'Trump Will Need to Resist the Impulse to Hit the Twitter Trigger', *Australian*, 28 April 2018, www.theaustralian.com.au/news/world/trump-will-need-to-resist-impulse-to-hit-the-twitter-trigger/news-story/d9d245e22726cb92d00c21d4cc23d23f.

Conclusion: Visual autoethnography as strategic imagination

The purpose of this chapter has been to explore how my experience of working in the DMZ, and my own photographs from that time, can be used as a form of strategic imagination that sheds new light on the Korean conflict. As Sargeant pointed out, this strategic imagination inevitably entails—and must engage with—a tension between the imagination and the realities of the material world.³⁸ Embracing the strategic imagination does not mean one can ignore the empirical realities or simply make things up. But neither can one assume that empirical realities are just out there and can be represented without bias. Our representations of the world—and thus, by definition, the policies that emerge from them—are always partial and thus inevitably political in nature. It is in the tension between these two poles that a creative approach to strategy can find innovative solutions to security dilemmas.

I have tried to show how my own experiences and photographs can offer two types of insights into the security dilemmas on the Korean Peninsula. First, I demonstrated that visual autoethnography can reveal how militarised masculinities are so deeply entrenched that they are taken for granted and shape security policies in fundamental ways. Looking at my photographs of the DMZ today, I notice one thing above all: their strikingly gendered nature. There are virtually no women in them. What is particularly revealing for me—and politically significant—is that three decades ago, when I took these photographs, I noticed everything except the absence of women. I came from and was embedded in a context that rendered gendered systems of inclusion—and the problematic militaristic policies they facilitate—natural and largely invisible. My inevitably subjective experiences show how deeply embedded militarised masculinities are and how they shape all aspects of security politics on the peninsula. Innovative solutions to the existing security dilemmas must challenge these militaristic patterns and promote a form of strategic imagination that can offer genuinely new ways of solving conflict and securing peace.

38 Sargeant, Chapter 2, this volume.



Plate 10.17 Pyongyang, 1986–88

Photo: Roland Bleiker.

Second, reflecting on my positionality and my photographs of North Korea shows how prevailing Western strategic approaches and public perceptions are partial and highly political: they vilify the North and present it as an authoritarian rogue regime whose irrational leadership regularly threatens regional and world peace. While true on some level, these discourses are also partial and, more importantly, they present North Korea as a mad and irrational state. Visual positionality here offers pathways to appreciate the more complex nature of the Korean conflict and envisage innovative ways of understanding and addressing its security dilemmas. They could facilitate, for instance, an appreciation of how and why North Korea acts the way it does and, in so doing, lead to more informed strategic approaches.

There is no way a short chapter can outline in detail how strategic imagination can be used to re-evaluate the complex security situation on the Korean Peninsula. I have at best tried to offer two very short illustrations via a visual autoethnography. And I hope these illustrations have offered at least a convincing conceptual point in support of strategic imagination: that its usefulness should be judged not by the empirical accuracy of the insights that are generated but by the way they help us view entrenched security

problems in a new light. Doing so is the precondition for finding innovative political solutions to conflicts that seem to have become intractable, like the one on the Korean Peninsula.

This is why the usefulness and power of visual autoethnography lie not in providing more accurate knowledge of empirical realities, but in the ability to reveal how prevailing ways of seeing, thinking and conducting security politics are so deeply entrenched and taken for granted that their often problematic nature is no longer recognised, yet alone discussed or addressed.

The broader lessons from my study suggest that scholarly work and policy recommendations based on strategic imagination should be pursued and evaluated by criteria that go beyond traditional social scientific validations. This is because strategic imagination is not about offering an accurate depiction of existing security dilemmas. It is about overcoming them. It is about reimagining the world around us, including the most pressing defence policy problems. Sargeant stresses this point: the ‘quality of a country’s strategic imagination may be judged by how it responds to the world—the space it creates for action’.³⁹ Opening such spaces breaks with existing habits and policy traditions. It is taking risks. A new strategy might be unproven and not yet empirically validated, but this does not render it invalid because, ultimately, the most crucial ‘proof’ will be how this policy ‘might shape and therefore change the world as it is’.⁴⁰

39 Sargeant, ‘Challenges to the Australian Strategic Imagination’, 10.

40 *ibid.*, 9.

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