

# Field Notes from South Korea: Local Development in the Land of Securitized Peace

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## Introduction

SOUTH KOREAN LANDSCAPES are profoundly shaped by the country's unending war with North Korea. Although the leaders of North and South Korea recently agreed to negotiate an end to the Korean War in the coming months, Korea's peace is tenuous and securitized, undergirded by massive military complexes on both sides of the border. From the anti-tank berms that cut through rice paddies in the northern border area to the United States military's Chinook helicopters that whiz back and forth delivering supplies to a remote missile-defense base in the south, it seems that no part of South Korea is free of reminders that the conflict between north and south is still unresolved.

When I first started a Ph.D. program in geography at UC-Berkeley in 2013, I was not curious about militarism; rather, I was focused on locally driven, large-scale, rural-to-urban real estate conversion projects that seemed to dominate South Korea. In the years I spent living in South Korea on and off prior to starting my Ph.D. program, I had noticed that local governments tended to take on extraordinarily ambitious development projects but often fell short of their objectives. Yet when I undertook a pilot study in 2015, I started to realize that, in addition to the large, systemic forces of state and capital, militarism was also shaping local development processes.

Following my pilot study, given my position as a U.S. researcher, I decided to change my research focus to the question of how U.S. military infrastructures intersect with the kinds of local development plans in which I was interested. U.S. military infrastructures, such as bases, training areas, artillery batteries, and storage facilities, comprise only a slice of South Korea's total security landscape, but they have tremendous influence on local development patterns.

Today, U.S. infrastructures wield a different kind of influence than they did three or four decades ago. Whereas U.S. bases could previously serve as a

foothold for neighborhood economies, local governments today tend to support U.S. military projects only insofar as they come along with massive government subsidies that support non-military local development projects. Most local governments would prefer that the U.S. military return its installation lands, which would allow private developers to undertake new development projects there.

The South Korean central government in Seoul, however, does not normally consult local governments or take a democratic approach when it negotiates facilities placements with the U.S. In a pair of agreements reached in 2002 and 2004, the U.S. agreed to close thirty-seven military installations, including the Yongsan Garrison in Seoul and several bases near the North-South border. Meanwhile, the U.S. began preparing for a significant expansion of one of its two bases in Pyeongtaek. With so many communities affected by these transitions, Seoul faced backlash from multiple directions. Under pressure from the U.S., the central government attempted to solve its base-related political problems by enacting a string of local development schemes that had wildly disparate results.

Below, in this update from the field, I provide a brief tour of a few of the places most affected by the spatial reorganization of U.S. military infrastructures, focusing mostly on cities near Seoul (Figure 1).



Figure 1.—Research sites mentioned in this article. (Author map)

## Pyeongtaek

Initially, I chose to conduct a pilot study in Pyeongtaek because it was one of the fastest-growing cities in the country. It had a soaring real-estate market and several ambitious industrial-development projects that involved the kinds of large-scale, rural-to-urban conversions that piqued my interest. I was not planning to study the city's two major U.S. military bases. I had no framework within the field of urban geography for considering how foreign military infrastructures could form part of an urban landscape. However, as I interviewed the city's planners, developers, and residents, it became clear to me that I would not be able to understand the city's development without understanding the U.S. presence there.

In 2004, the South Korean central government announced that the U.S. planned to undertake a threefold expansion of Camp Humphreys, a helicopter base in Pyeongtaek. Hundreds of people, mostly elderly smallholders, stood to lose their land. The whole community in the base expansion area would be dispersed. At the same time, the U.S. planned to construct more than six hundred new buildings on the site and relocate thousands of U.S. service members, civilian workers, and their families there. Pyeongtaek would become the new “hub” of the U.S.-South Korea alliance (Figure 2).

With the announcement of the base expansion, major protests broke out in the city. Activists and residents occupied the Camp Humphreys expansion area, continuing to farm and live there against government orders until 2006, when they were forcefully removed in a violent confrontation with police (Yeo 2010).

While conducting my pilot study, I came to realize that Pyeongtaek's tantalizing new development plan, which involved multiple mega-scale projects, had a direct relationship to U.S. military-base expansion in the city. Worried about anti-base protests expanding, the local and central governments negotiated a massive, central-government subsidization and deregulation package aimed at sparking local development. After the local government introduced these development plans and rhetorically linked them to U.S. base expansion, approval for the base shot up among Pyeongtaek residents (Lee 2010).

In addition to concerns over land loss, many Pyeongtaek residents and officials have been worried that, with the introduction of thousands of Americans into the city, the area around Camp Humphreys would swell into a giant “camp town.” Camp towns are highly stigmatized U.S. military base



*Figure 2.—New off-post soldier housing in Pyeongtaek. A chain of relationships make these developments possible: landowner-developers hire construction companies, who take the largest cut with the least risk; after construction, middle-class Korean property speculators purchase the properties; and U.S.-approved real-estate agents recruit American residents. Extractable rents available through the U.S. military housing allowance are determined only by size, not quality. (Author photo)*

areas, initially formed during and right after the Korean War (1950–53), when thousands of desperate migrants fled to U.S. military base areas in search of U.S. soldier dollars. Camp towns, called “villes” by U.S. soldiers, cater mainly to soldiers spending money in the sex and entertainment industries (Shin 1991; Moon 1997).

The specter of the stigmatized camp town haunts Pyeongtaek. Keeping in line with neoliberal urban branding strategies prevalent around the country, the local government and local developers are fervently promoting the idea that the arrival of the Americans will give the city an international, cosmopolitan atmosphere. At the height of anti-base protests, the local government distributed leaflets promoting the idea that the city would be a hub of English-language education and foreign investment.

## Border Cities

Since the 1980s and 1990s, peace activists and anti-militarism activists in South Korea have been calling for U.S. base closures, citing problems such as environmental pollution, soldier crime and gendered violence in camp towns, and taxpayer burden in maintaining U.S. installations (Moon 2012). The 2002 and 2004 U.S. promises to close several bases near the border were meant to address some of these criticisms, if only superficially; the U.S. had long desired to consolidate its troops and to move out of Seoul and the border area. As Seoul grew rapidly after the war, both the U.S. and Seoul acknowledged the tactical constraints of operating in Seoul. In the post-Cold War period, the Americans also wanted to shift their emphasis from ground power to air and sea power, which meant closing many of their border installations (Nam 2006; Kim 2017).

Returning to South Korea for fieldwork in 2017, I was eager to learn how the dynamics of U.S. military spatial reorganization were playing out beyond Pyeongtaek, especially in U.S. base closure areas. What did development-savvy local government officials think about the closures? How many installations were being closed? And what was happening on deactivated base lands and in old camp town areas?

Kicking off a new phase of fieldwork, I rented a car and headed for the border, starting in Uijeongbu, north of Seoul. Because South Korean cartographers scramble and intentionally misrepresent military bases on government-approved maps in accordance with national security laws, I initially had trouble locating American installation sites listed in the deactivation agreements between the U.S. and South Korea. In search of more information, I turned to a public, crowd-sourced mapping application. Not only had U.S. soldiers mapped both active and deactivated installation locations, but they had also nostalgically shared memories of their favorite hangouts in and around the bases.

After exploring the areas to the extent possible, I started to approach local planners and officials to ask specific questions about the way they were thinking about U.S. military installations. I expected local officials to express ambivalence toward or criticism of the U.S. presence in their cities. However, in our conversations, most of them were totally focused on how the central government, not the U.S., was handling the base conversion process. When their city had received subsidies from the central government, they were pleased. When they felt like the central government was ignoring them or the conversions were not going as planned, they organized local residents to



protest. They were demanding compensation for the economic losses their cities had suffered while hosting the Americans.

While Uijeongbu was a small agricultural community before the Korean War, the city now has a population of nearly half a million people, and it has taken on a new role as a suburb of Seoul. After the war, U.S. bases provided a stable economic foundation for the city. Today, U.S. soldier dollars are less important to the local economy than the real estate and service industries.

Out of seven Uijeongbu bases slated for return to South Korea under a 2002 agreement, the U.S. has returned five and still occupies two. Thirteen years after deactivation, the former Camp LaGuardia site in the middle of the city has seen no development except for the construction of a road that bisects the large swath of land (Figure 3). Brushing off the idea that Camp LaGuardia was a scar on the city's landscape, city planners in Uijeongbu assured me that all base conversions were proceeding smoothly—although the city was having trouble attracting investors for some of the sites.



Figure 3.—Disused lands of former Camp LaGuardia land in downtown Uijeongbu. The site is used partially as an illegal farm and as an illegal dump. The text on the fence reads, “Uijeongbu City.” (Author photo)

Delaying closure plans, the U.S. still occupies two bases: Camp Red Cloud and Camp Stanley. Camp Red Cloud was the headquarters for the 2<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Division, the first line of defense against a North Korean ground invasion, although its headquarters were recently relocated to Pyeongtaek.

City planners told me that they would like to convert the site into a U.S.-themed security tourism zone, although they have virtually no power in deciding whether and when the U.S. will return the base land. The U.S. also occupies Camp Stanley, on the outskirts of Uijeongbu, although this base is depopulated and serves mainly as a fueling station. Given the near lack of U.S. soldier dollars flowing through the economy around Camp Stanley, city officials are eager to see the return of this land.

Next to Camp Stanley, Bbaetbeol Village is a classic camp town (Figures 4 and 5). Until recently, Bbaetbeol was home to dozens of clubs catering to U.S. soldiers. In the 1970s, a complex network of traffickers, agents, and club owners controlled the movements of women working in the clubs: The village had only one access gate, which local pimps closed in the evenings to keep the women inside.



Figure 4.—Shuttered Bbaetbeol camp-town club outside U.S. Camp Stanley. (Author photo)





Figure 5.—Shuttered Bbaetbeol camp town clubs outside U.S. Camp Stanley.  
(Author photo)

While the number of Korean women working in camp towns like Bbaetbeol dropped in 1980s and 1990s, Filipina women started migrating to South Korea, ending up in camp towns. Many of them came to South Korea seeking jobs as waitresses and singers. But the women found themselves tricked by international employment agents and trapped in precarious economic, legal, and romantic situations (Chen 2013).

Heading north, after Uijeongbu, Dongducheon was my next stop. Because the last Bbaetbeol club closed in 2017, some of the Filipina women I met in Bbaetbeol had recently started working in Dongducheon's camp town. As I learned visiting them one evening at their new club, their Dongducheon bar owner, or “mama,” requires them to spend time with their American customers both inside and outside the club. Club owners nickname this practice, which builds customer loyalty and subverts anti-sex work laws, “the real girlfriend strategy.”

A city of around ninety-thousand people nestled between rugged mountains near the border, Dongducheon faces a different set of challenges from those of Uijeongbu. Rather than dealing with the return of vast amounts of deactivated U.S. base land, the main concern of officials in Dongducheon is

the ambiguity surrounding the timeline of U.S. base returns. According to agreements between the U.S. and South Korea, all six bases in Dongducheon, which for decades occupied 42 percent of the city's area and the vast majority of its flat, plannable space, should have been returned a dozen years ago. However, the U.S. still occupies its two largest bases in the city and has delayed plans for the return of the lands, arguing that it needs to maintain infantry troops close to the border.

Intrigued by Dongducheon's relationship with the U.S., I returned to the city at the end of 2017 and remained there for two months. In a series of meetings, frustrated city officials told me that plans for demilitarization—which for them means access to more land—have faced a number of setbacks. First, in 2004, the U.S. suddenly deployed thousands of soldiers from Dongducheon to Iraq, leading to a severe drop in soldier population and a loss for local businesses. While the community has depended on U.S. soldier dollars for decades, from this moment onward the land was a more valuable asset than the remaining American consumers.

Local Koreans were again enraged when the U.S. and South Korea announced in 2014 that the U.S. would delay deactivations until “around the year 2020,” when South Korean forces could develop their own counter-fire reinforcements at the border and assume wartime operational control of the South Korean military (the U.S. currently has wartime command).<sup>1</sup> U.S. military public affairs officers refused to talk with me about their plans to leave Dongducheon, but in informal conversations, several Americans living and working on U.S. bases in the city told me that it might take decades before the U.S. withdraws. As it stands, the city is blocked from undertaking any alternative local-development strategy. Security-related land-use restrictions also inhibit development possibilities.

In meetings over coffee on the base or while driving around its perimeter, local officials in charge of planning the conversion process repeatedly rehearsed a litany of complaints against the central government. They pointed specifically toward the fact that while the central government has provided generous compensation to Pyeongtaek, it has provided Dongducheon with virtually no compensation (Figure 6). On top of this, the city has lost decades of tax revenue on its most valuable lands, which the U.S. occupies.

Further, if—and when—the U.S. returns the installation lands to South Korea, it is the central government, not the local government nor any other party, that will retain ownership of the land. This means that Dongducheon,



Figure 6.—Protest sign in downtown Dongducheon reading, “Quickly follow through on the state-promised industrial complex!” (left) and “The US military base has been stationed here for 66 years! The state must provide compensation!” (right). The person who erected the sign—a local property developer—told me that the city government provided him with the ad space for free, and that the sign will remain indefinitely. (Author photo)

or possibly a private developer, will have to repurchase the land, paying market rate. According to a special law created in part to appease leftist critics of South Korean military expenditures, funds from these land sales will be sent directly to Pyeongtaek for the Camp Humphreys expansion.

Even if the U.S. does return the installations lands, Dongducheon and other military host cities face yet another problem: The U.S. refuses to participate in the environmental decontamination process. According to the 1966 Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) between Washington and Seoul, the U.S. has no legal responsibility to contribute to cleanup costs. Activists call for SOFA amendments on this point and many others.

Facing a similar set of problems, Paju, another border city, is seeing vast swaths of former U.S. military land sit idle and polluted. The U.S. managed to deactivate and return six large bases in Paju in 2005, on schedule according to bilateral agreements. Yet, a dozen years on, almost no development has been completed on these sites. At least two university satellite campuses had been slated for different sites, but the educational institutions canceled their projects for financial reasons.

Accompanied by two Korean friends, I visited one of these deactivated bases, Camp Howze, during my northern tour. Outside of the installation, which was established by the U.S. during the Korean War, my friends and I found a hollowed-out camp town called Bongilcheon Village. Small, one-story homes lined the streets, along with shuttered nightclubs, currency exchange shops, and shoe repair and tailor shops with signage in English and Filipino.

In the mostly deserted village, we met two elderly women peeling garlic, sitting on a makeshift platform on a narrow footpath. One of the women told us that, for a while in the late 1990s, she had rented out a room in her home to two Filipina women who worked in Bongilcheon camp town clubs. Yet U.S. soldiers continually came looking for the two women, knocking on her front door even long after the Filipina women had departed for good. The elderly Korean woman could not speak with the soldiers; she told us the only English word she knows is “okay.” She grew so tired of soldiers coming to her door, and of hearing their footsteps outside, that one day she blocked off her front door with bricks. She now uses an alternative entrance (Figure 7).

To our surprise, the two elderly women on the footpath also told us that we were free to enter Camp Howze. We had spent the previous part of our day locating former U.S. base sites, but we had confronted access barriers such as fences and alarm systems. The gate to Camp Howze, however, was wide open. Inside, my friends and I discovered abandoned U.S. buildings with smashed-out windows, presumably made unusable to prevent squatting (Figure 8).

Pocheon, located northeast of Seoul and east of Dongducheon, is not home to major U.S. bases, but instead to several firing ranges, including the large Rodriguez Live Fire Complex. Locals live with the sounds of bombs exploding and guns firing just on the other side of the imposing Rodriguez range walls. Occasionally, stray shells and bullets escape those walls and land in nearby villages, damaging homes and endangering locals. With each incident, villagers living near the firing ranges demand meetings with U.S. commanders, and they demand compensation from Washington and Seoul. In response, the U.S. makes incremental safety improvements, but nothing fundamental has changed in recent years.

Unlike Pyeongtaek’s new “international city” image, there is no glossy marketing campaign or promise of economic growth that can mask the bare militarism of a live fire complex.





Figure 7.—House with brick door in Bongilcheon Village. (Author photo)



Figure 8.—Abandoned U.S. military building inside deactivated Camp Howze. (Author photo)

## Conclusion

In discussing a few key sites around Seoul, I have only scratched the surface. U.S. military infrastructures affect communities all over the country. The impending conversion of the U.S. Yongsan Garrison in central Seoul to an urban park has sparked an entire substratum of debates about the tangible legacy of the U.S. military in the South Korean capital city. Meanwhile, the U.S. network of bases extends not only northward toward the border, but also southward into Pyeongtaek, Kunsan, and the southeastern part of the country. The U.S. has no significant plans to withdraw from Busan, Jinhae, Daegu, Waegwan, Pohang, or Seongju.

In fact, the U.S. recently expanded its presence in the southeastern part of the country with the controversial deployment of the terminal





Figure 9.—Soseong Village convenience store, near the THAAD deployment site in Seongju County. (Author photo)

high-altitude area defense (THAAD) missile interceptor system. In 2017, the South Korean government defied the wishes of local people in Seongju County and approved THAAD deployment on a golf course.

I spent a month living among anti-THAAD activists near the deployment site. I learned that, at first, they had objected to the missile defense technology on the grounds that the system's powerful radar would have adverse health and environmental effects. Their critiques quickly expanded, however, when they started to believe that the technology was not meant to protect South Korean people from North Korean attack, but to expand the surveillance reach of the U.S. into China and Russia. They argued that the central government, under pressure from the U.S., was ignoring the voices of its own citizens. The THAAD case exposed the limits of South Korean democracy under the conditions of securitized peace (Figure 9).

Early one day in September 2017, I happened to be on the train for a short visit to Seongju. That same day, the Moon Jae-in government suddenly announced that a U.S. caravan would deliver four truck-mounted THAAD launchers to Seongju within the next twenty-four hours. Right after I ar-

rived in Soseong Village in Seongju, 8,000 police officers descended on the village and lined its streets. Locals, many of them elderly, frantically set up road blocks and began chaining themselves together and clinging to the bottoms of police tow trucks. As the day wore on into night and then morning, I watched a sixteen-hour showdown between tearful locals and young conscripted police officers in the village. By mid-morning, the road to the golf course-turned-THAAD deployment site was clear, and the U.S. caravan was passing through. Documenting this violent event was the most difficult and emotional moment in my fieldwork so far (see Martin 2017).

In relocating its headquarters from Seoul to Pyeongtaek and maintaining its southern bases, including the THAAD battery, the U.S. military in South Korea is, in essence, transforming itself into a rear support and logistics force. On the one hand, the transition is in line with joint South Korean and U.S. plans to transfer wartime operational control of the South Korean military to South Korea by pulling away from the border. On the other hand, multibillion-dollar infrastructure investments in Pyeongtaek and elsewhere indicate that the U.S. intends to stay on the Korean peninsula for the next several decades, whether or not reunification with the north happens. On top of U.S. government desires to maintain a forceful presence in East Asia, the U.S. also answers to private industries: Korea's securitized peace is big business for military contractors and weapons manufacturers.

In South Korea, militarism is not only an ideology—it is also a set of social and technical relationships that permeate and shape concrete space. At times it presents itself as a normal part of everyday life, blending in with real-estate markets and shopping boulevards and exciting multicultural scenes. And at other times, it disrupts everyday space, bringing 8,000 riot police and truck-mounted launchers into a quiet village. Heading into the thick of 2018, I hope it does not bring a more catastrophic trauma to the Korean peninsula.

## Notes

1 Joint communiqué, the 46<sup>th</sup> ROK-U.S. Security Consultative Meeting, October 23, 2014, Washington, D.C.

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