On a hot afternoon in early summer almost 10 years ago, Han Young-soo, then a 19-year-old North Korean guard, crossed the Demilitarized Zone between North and South Korea on foot.

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Three hours was all it took for Mr. Han to reach a small town called Hwacheon in Gangwon province in the South. He boasts that it would have taken him only about an hour if he had not stopped at the Military Demarcation Line in the middle of the zone. At the border - one foot in the North and the other in the South - he thought one last time about his decision, and then moved on to have his next supper in the South. Today, he works for the Seoul Metropolitan Subway Corp.

But his journey of no return was not easy. Along the way he had to cross two strings of barbed wire with a 20,000-volt current running through them. Crawling under the wires, Mr. Han also had to be careful not to set off land mines everywhere he went. He made his trip in broad daylight so he could watch for the mines. One promise of a unified Korea is the reconstruction of a North-South road network that will link the lower half of the Korean Peninsula to Russia and to Europe beyond. It would be a long trip, but Koreans might someday be able to drive from Busan to London. Historians and engineers foresee the reopening of main roads that will link Seoul with Pyongyang. Moreover, old rail links are soon to be revived between Seoul and Sinuiju in North Korea, along with a road between Yangyang in the South and Wonsan in the North on the East Coast side. One big hassle to be dealt with for inland traffic, however, is the Demilitarized Zone, a no man's land lying between the two Koreas.

The chief question is what to do about the mines. The Demilitarized Zone, or DMZ, has the highest density of land mines in the world: 2.3 for every square meter, according to Cho Jai-kook, a coordinator of the Korea Campaign to Ban Land mines. How to clean up the DMZ - the 155-mile-long, two-mile-wide no-man's-land - will be a major predicament. Under the truce agreement that ended the hostilities, if not the actual war, the DMZ must be free of any arms, though the words are not matched by the reality. Every year, 10 people on average, civilians and soldiers, die in land mine mishaps, with the DMZ as the epicenter. What makes it worse is the lack of a land mine map, which under international law is required of any power that chooses to lay mines. The maps are the guides by which the mines are supposed to be removed. 'It's a universal principle for an army to remove the land mines when they withdraw, but it did not happen during the Korean War,' Mr. Cho says. The way Mr. Cho sees it, however, all entry to the DMZ must be banned after unification until the mines issue is resolved. That will take years. One reason is that most of the mines in DMZ are 'dump mines,' which are difficult to find even with metal detectors. Another reason the DMZ will persist as a no-go area is budgetary. According to Mr. Cho, it will take about 60 years and at least $11.7 billion to clear the zone of the mines. In Germany, Mr. Cho said, 'the government tracked down people who planted mines in order to remove them. It took a long time but was still thorough.' Once the mines are cleared, the strip may hold great promise as a nature preserve. Former President Kim Dae-jung has said the DMZ should be a home to 'nature, free of any human touch.' But Hahm Gwang-bok, who has been researching the DMZ for 30 years, does not agree. 'Everyone thinks the DMZ is some kind of Garden of Eden where nature is preserved perfectly,' he said, 'but now the ecosystem is actually endangered and we need a Noah's Ark to preserve the endangered species of the DMZ.' The DMZ is no longer a natural setting, according to Mr. Hahm. 'Something's not right with the ecosystem,' he said. Alien plant species, such as ambrosia artemisiifolia, have invaded the area.

Elk have grown used to humans and have become tamer; soldiers have been feeding eagles. 'It's twisted by an outside force - the Cold War,' Mr. Hahm said. 'It needs some serious treatment to take the right care of the area, which would easily take decades.' But he also recognizes the significance of the DMZ, saying 'There's no argument that DMZ has a very particular ecosystem that provokes broad academic interest.' Son Gi-woong, a researcher at Korea Institute for National Unification, echoes the sentiment, saying, 'The DMZ can give both Koreas a great opportunity as a unique place in the world in every sense, if it's well preserved, that is.' Mr. Son, as the expert in DMZ issues over years, suggests that the DMZ can be a home to international organizations like the United Nations. 'Having the United Nations Environment Program based in the DMZ is one way,' Mr. Son says, 'and the DMZ in the long run must be made the most of by being the bridge of the North and South Korea. Only then can the Korean Peninsula claim its position as the starting point to link the Silk Road all the way to Europe.' Others have also come up with ways to use the DMZ after reunification. Architect Lee Chung-kee is one of them. In a recent exhibition on architectural and artistic ways to use the DMZ, Mr. Lee suggested a 'linear city plan.' Along the roads and railways that are to be built across the DMZ to connect North and South, Mr. Lee sees the possibility of building a city, making the most of the area's environment. Mr. Lee is not quite sure when his plan will be realized, but says, 'There's no argument that the DMZ is the single most precious piece of land left in this country, with all kinds or possibilities.'


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