Peace for Public Health Cooperation between the Cities: Epistemological Turn of Urban Diplomacy on Korean Question

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I. Introduction

Some of scholars suggests that the current conflict between the liberal and authoritarian camps may be seen as a precursor to a "new" Cold War or even a Third World War (Juergensmeyer, 2023). The Russia-Ukraine war has made this situation more visible, and amidst the growing anxiety due to the long-term global economic stagnation, this anxiety evokes a strong sense of déjà vu. However, this sense of familiarity cannot be dismissed solely as negative, since history can present itself anew in different contexts (Leffler, 2019; Brands and Gaddis, 2021).

Above all, the violence of our current era is more complex than that of the past. In other words, it is not as clear-cut as the Cold War conflicts of the past. The confrontational framework between liberalism and authoritarianism is merely justifying and normalizing the conflict through liberal norms and their arbitrary interpretation (Yi, 2022b; Yi, 2022a). Human instrumental reason continues to deteriorate in extreme situations. Moreover, the Cold War memories, resurrected by the 'nuclear threat', lead us into a period of confusion and chaos. This does not only refer to the Ukraine war on the other side of the globe; tensions surrounding the Korean Peninsula are also consistently escalating.

The 2008 Kumgang Mountain shooting incident and the 2010 Cheonan and Yeonpyeong incidents significantly restricted inter-Korean exchanges and led to a frozen state of inter-Korean relations. In effect, both governmental and civilian exchanges between the two Koreas were virtually suspended. Over the next decade, the situation worsened. Although three inter-Korean summits in 2018 generated momentum for peace on the Korean Peninsula, the situation has continued to deteriorate since the Hanoi US-North Korea summit. Particularly under the new government, a substantial number of missiles, unprecedented even compared to the past, have been launched into the East Sea and the West Sea, and for the first time since the Korean War, beyond the Northern Limit Line (NLL) to the south. Upcoming US-South Korea or US-South Korea-Japan military exercises and North Korea's "proportional response" seem unlikely to cease and are expected to intensify. In response, nuclear armament is becoming a discourse in South Korean politics, and the United States is strengthening alliances and implementing measures that press China under the guise of targeting North Korea. The annulment of the September 19 Pyongyang Joint Declaration has rendered the peace roadmap envisioned in the Pyongyang Joint Declaration a mirage.

In this context, it seems that all momentum for inter-Korean dialogue has been exhausted. Thus, questions such as "Is peace possible?" and "What can be done to achieve it?" seem to be mere deep sighs. However, transforming these lamentations into 'admiration' is the destiny of political science. Therefore, this paper aims to examine the issues surrounding tensions on the Korean Peninsula and assess their limitations through an epistemological reconstruction of peace to explore the diversification of subjects. By evaluating concrete empirical measures to overcome the limitations of current discussions, it seeks to provide theoretical grounds for attempts and alternatives. It is undeniable that the absence of discussions on subject-epistemology has restricted the issue of inter-Korean exchange to debates over 'means' and

'methods'. Thus, this paper aims to explore the potential for communication between the two Koreas and peace on the Korean Peninsula through grassroots democracy. It seeks to examine this from both theoretical and empirical dimensions. To this end, it first reviews existing research to identify the limitations of state-centric epistemology, and aims to draw out the relevance of local governments as subjects of grassroots democracy as an alternative. Through this subjective re-awareness, it seeks to redefine peace. Finally, it intends to focus on urban diplomacy and public health cooperation as an agenda for urban diplomacy as direct means to construct peace.

II. Literature Review

Discussions on peace on the Korean Peninsula fundamentally revolve around the establishment of a regional peace regime under the international system, frequently focusing on inter-Korean or regional peace treaties (Jeong, 2021). Major topics include the East (North) Asian community, security community, and the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula (NWFZ: Nuclear Weapon Free Zone) (Jeon, 1999; Han, 2005; Lee, 2006; Baek, 2012). Specifically, discussions encompass the possibility of an inter-Korean peace treaty, declarations ending the state of war (Jo, 2015; Hong, 2013), and joint security guarantee treaties among the Six-Party Talks nations.

These discussions on regional communities, peace, security systems, and various peace treaties naturally extend to research in diplomatic strategy (Lee, 2015). While there are studies on the visions of unification and peace between the Koreas, focusing on perceptions and policy directions (Jeon, 2006; Kim, 2002; Seo, 2009), research largely assumes the premise of alliance diplomacy with the United States, despite a diverse spectrum of diplomacy involving the four major powers—US, Japan, Russia, and China (Jung, 2021; Jeong, 2022; Eom, 2018; Hong, 2007; Min et al., 2021). These studies propose various strategic objectives and strategies spanning short, medium, and long-term goals for regime construction, which are operationalized into strategic dialogues such as summits, high-level meetings, working-level talks, economic cooperation, and military dialogues, eventually leading to joint statements, agreements, and accords. For instance, in envisioning a Northeast or East Asian peace regime, mechanisms like the Six-Party Talks (Jang, 2007; Baek, 2003), ASEAN, ARF (ASEAN Regional Forum), and other cooperative frameworks (Lee, 2015; Koo, 2009; Kim, 2012; Lee, 2015), as well as economic cooperation and humanitarian aid, are evaluated for building trust on the Korean Peninsula (Chung, 2019; Shin, 1996; Lee, 2018).

Most of these studies began in earnest after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, during the post-Cold War era. While some research expressed concern over the increasing likelihood of war on the Korean Peninsula due to heightened instability in the international system, others deeply explored the possibilities of North Korean collapse or a peace regime on the Korean Peninsula under a US-centered unipolar system. However, these approaches share the same ontology and epistemology, presuming the state as the primary actor within the international system. Thus, the question "What can the state do for peace?" inevitably finds its answer in the objectives of "survival" and "self-help" within an "anarchical system" (Koo, 2008; Waltz, 1979). Even from a domestic political perspective, peace discourse is often supplanted by nuclear discourse (Yoon, 2021). While this may offer meaningful explanations of the situation, it results in the securitization of peace rather than fostering its construction.

Such epistemological discourse formation reveals clear limitations, prompting a reevaluation of the ontological and epistemological approaches to Korean issues. This paper distinguishes itself by emphasizing the diversification of peace and the corresponding shift in diplomatic strategies under a new international order through an epistemological transformation. This

distinction constitutes the academic contribution of this study, setting it apart from existing research.

This epistemological shift necessitates beginning with questions like "What must be done for peace?" and "Which actors can realize peace, and through what means?" In this regard, the paper seeks to identify formal actors in the international community with relative autonomy amid structural changes resulting from shifts in relations among major powers, considering ways to establish a foundation for peace. This represents a meaningful step beyond state-centered solutions. Additionally, by exploring the potential within local governments, which maintain political legitimacy through elections, the study reconstructs legitimate alternatives at an epistemological level, overcoming the limitations of non-governmental actors. Given their relative autonomy and capacity for official diplomatic roles, such as public diplomacy and citizen diplomacy, compared to state entities fully bound by the international system's structure, further consideration is warranted.

III. Epistemological Reconstruction of Peace

1. The Fracture in Peace Perception According to Levels of Agency
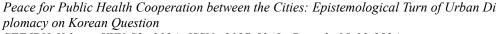
While peace is frequently mentioned, its perception encompasses various layers. Although there is certainly an ethical definition of peace, the perception of it is inherently subjective, and therefore cannot be entirely objective. Thus, the definition of peace is neither singular nor conclusive; rather, it is an ongoing process continually pursued (Hart, 1967: 339; Ramsey, 2002: 503).

War, as a product of human will, is considered inevitable (Walzer, 1977: 9). Such mainstream international political theses naturally position power, interests, and national security as primary drivers of war, making the norm of peace appear awkward (Walzer, 1977: 3; Waltz, 1979: 111; Morgenthau, 1993: 10). Furthermore, war often emerges from conflicts between hegemonic states aiming to maintain the status quo and challenging states seeking to establish a new order (Gilpin, 1988, 1983: 11-15; Waltz, 1979: 88-118).

Consequently, perceptions of peace and corresponding actions also possess various dimensions. Generally, peace refers to the absence of war and the presence of mechanisms to deter it (Galtung & Fischer, 2013). Some adopt a more active interpretation, envisioning peace as not only the absence of war but also of structural violence imposed by oppressive and authoritarian regimes, as well as "cultural violence" such as ecological or gender injustice (Galtung, 1967, 1969). Peace, therefore, is a state where physical war is absent and human dignity is acknowledged. Further concretized, it encompasses economic oppression, linguistic violence, climate change, and various visible and invisible forms of violence against individuals, rendering peace somewhat idealized.

How, then, should the perception of peace be framed beyond active or passive forms, as a matter of international order? Peace can be assessed through the various configurations of international order. Neorealists have extensively studied these configurations. Whether unipolar, bipolar, or a balance of power, these are manifestations of international orders that realize peace.

Hence, the gap between the norms of peace studies and the physical order of neorealist international politics is significant and profound, both physically and conceptually. As demonstrated by the power-oriented appropriation of liberal norms revealed in the recent Ukraine-Russia war, norms ultimately serve as instruments to justify power. While peace can be universally acknowledged as an ideal, there are diverse opinions on its state and realization. One of the most prominent views is war as a means to restore justice (peace and human rights)

and its allowance (Hart, 1967: 339; Ramsey, 2002: 503). However, as peace involving violence should not be the "peace of the victor," it must accompany normative legitimacy where the human rights of all, particularly civilian victims in defeated nations, are restored (Walzer, 1977: 162-168). This implies that peace should begin with the realization of justice (Vatican Council, 1990: 261) and that the recourse to war as a last resort for the realization of this ideal (peace) is inevitable (Hart, 1967: 339; Ramsey, 2002: 503). Thus, engaging in war with just intentions to establish peace, aligned with justice, transforms that violence into a genuine good (Walzer, 2002: 925; Ramsey, 1961: x vii; Malham, 1997: 88-89). Accordingly, peace must possess legitimacy at the commencement, throughout, and at the conclusion of war.

Nevertheless, the justification of violence to achieve peace ultimately serves power. Although it proposes the moral consciousness of individuals to control state rationality, it fails to present the philosophical standards and consensus on the ethical, normative, and natural law benchmarks concerning the right to life, namely 'human rights,' and clearly delineate the relationship between individual and collective human rights, thereby destabilizing the fundamental concept of justice (Peach, 1994: 161).

The discourse on human rights for peace encounters similar issues. The lack of a clear definition of human rights heightens the potential for their political exploitation through arbitrary interpretation. For example, when examining human rights issues in North Korea and the economic sanctions imposed by the international community, including the United States, leading to North Korea's economic downturn and resulting famine, both Pyongyang and Washington can be seen as violators of human rights. Ultimately, the criteria revert to the subjectivity and national interest concerning North Korea's strategic importance to the US and the regime's maintenance in North Korea. Additionally, as previously mentioned, tolerating situations where human rights are violated leads to a paradox where the inviolability of human rights is compromised (Walzer, 1977: 135, 231). Post-9/11, the US's security-centric epistemology restricted individual freedom and human rights, leaving only utilitarian ethics and collective interest.

Above all, awareness emerges of the problem that this is defined by an order formed by norms based on Western-centric understanding. From the late 19th century, as the European international society expanded into East Asia, the balance and norms as power directions of that system, and the institutionalized liberal norms established by the US after World War II, such as international law, have institutionalized and legitimized power-based peace. Paradoxically, these processes normalize the concept of peace as a better state for the purpose of war. It settles in another context, namely, as civilization or modernization in non-Western East Asia. In other words, peace becomes a contextually Westernized power peace.

However, does the fracture in the perception of peace exist solely within the aforementioned contexts and knowledge? Is the world perceived by humans, who are thrown into the world, entirely their own? (Heidegger, 1985) Can knowledge be detected purely through an objectivist epistemology? (Dilthey, 1972) Can knowledge be free from the epistemological frameworks of humans? (Gadamer, 2004) Can the social structures inherent within individuals not influence human epistemology? (Bourdieu, 2018)

This raises the need to redefine peace based on the subjective history and experiences of the Korean Peninsula. The current East Asian orders surrounding the Korean Peninsula can be understood as outcomes restructured by the Westphalian order and the American liberal order following World War II and the Korean War. Thus, given that Korea's division, war, and peace were shaped by the normative historical complexities of sovereignty, human rights, and democracy, an internal reconstruction of peace and vision is necessary. There is a need to attempt the reconstruction of peace through the "localization" of peace discourse and the interactions among regional members, cities, and individuals.

2. Localization of Peace: Peace Initiated from the 'City'

The prevailing image of peace is one constructed either within the order of sovereign states or through American liberalism. In other words, the peace promised by the Treaty of Westphalia, which ended the "Thirty Years' War" (realism and balance of power), and the peace within the unipolar hegemonic system centered around the newly emerged hegemon, the United States, after World War II (liberalism and norms) has dominated the international order in East Asia, once through colonialism and again through the violence of war/cold war. Although regionalism (Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere) was pursued by Japan, it was ultimately within the context of Western imperialism. East Asian peace has thus been continually reconstructed by Western order and rules.

The conceptual framework of peace is given alongside Western violence, but there is no concept of peace constructed from the regions we live in or the history we have experienced. This is not a call for a return to Sinocentrism, East Asian, or Oriental foundations, as such a return is either impractical or lacks the legitimacy to be claimed as regionalism. Moreover, given that the Westphalian sovereign state system is internalized in the international community, functioning through various international legal foundations that stabilize order, it is impossible to negate sovereignty and liberal norms without implying a departure from or abnormality within the current international society.

Nonetheless, historical experiences and differences are reemerging as novel forms of regionalization distinct from existing realities in East Asia. The interactions among regional countries, and the processes therein, awaken states to become reflexive agents that mutually construct and reconfigure these relationships (Gilson, 2002: 12). This process fosters continual externalization, redefining relationships anew, as seen among East Asian countries. Public, private, social, and economic interactions, particularly multilateral economic cooperation among regional states, are becoming established as a form of identity. However, shared experiences of colonialism and sovereignty violations do not appear to translate into political identity in economic cooperation or regional forums. While ASEAN has pursued identity as a community due to these experiences, states in Northeast Asia continue to grapple with modern conflicts such as historical and territorial disputes.

Modern conflicts and the strong exclusionary identities of post-colonial states can hinder the formation of regionalism based on interstate reciprocity for peace. However, the expansion of democracy at the micro-level, the spread of 'liberal norms', and enhanced communication via social media among states and regions provide relative autonomy from the previously exclusionary domain of sovereign states. This includes the expanding roles and influences of local governments as sub-state actors and non-state actors (businesses, NGOs, etc.). Multi-layered diplomacy, such as public and private diplomacy, is diversifying the subjects and targets of diplomacy, traditionally an exclusive function of sovereign states.

Among these, the agency of local governments or cities in diplomacy is particularly significant. Cities do not possess weapons, and inter-city exchanges signify socio-cultural interactions, suggesting that cities can become pivotal agents in arenas of peace and reconciliation (Galtung, 2000). Cities are fundamental components and influential actors in global governance and politics. This underscores the need to move away from state-centric epistemology and focus more on the dominance of governance (Acuto, 2013).

The agency of cities liberates the East Asian region from territorial obsessions that drive the strong exclusionary identities of post-colonial states. It envisions global cities as starting points for globalization and cultural crossroads, countering modern exclusionism. This is significant in that it facilitates socio-cultural exchanges in cities, where traditional international politics, constrained by the government representing the state, reaches a stalemate, creating possibilities
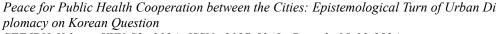
for change.

3. Another Peace Initiative: The Memory of the Pandemic and Intercity Public Health Cooperation

In transitioning to peace through urban diplomacy, the catalyst is crucial. The 2020 COVID-19 pandemic crisis thrust cities, states, regions, and the world into crisis. This situation was assessed for cooperation at various levels through ASEAN+3, the EU, the G20, and the UN. However, state-level responses demonstrated limitations within the internationalized system, focusing primarily on resource allocation rather than effectively controlling and implementing responses to the pandemic. City and local government responses were quicker and more effective. This was true not only for interstate cooperation but also for intercity exchanges. In the context of intensified US-China strategic competition and weakened global leadership in controlling the pandemic, intercity cooperation proved more efficient. As national governments faced limitations in responsibility and duty in the new crisis phase of COVID-19, local governments, businesses, NGOs, and individuals emerged as key actors in international cooperation.

This emergence highlights the potential of health cooperation as a catalyst for peace urban diplomacy in East Asia, a focus of this study. Major cities in East Asia, particularly in Korea, Japan, and China, have formed various partnerships, but these networks have been little more than ceremonial adornments without substantive exchange or cooperation. Criticism has persisted that urban diplomacy has become a tool for local government leaders to claim achievements (Jo, 2019).

However, the pandemic has prompted a shift in traditional security epistemology, elevating the concept of human security, and underscoring the need for substantive cooperation in urban diplomacy. The characteristics of human security, centered on the individual, accommodating diverse agendas and actors, complement the limitations of Korean local urban diplomacy, which has focused on economic benefits such as trade promotion and investment attraction. The shift in security concepts and the diversification of urban diplomacy agendas indicate that city governments are increasingly including citizen safety in their diplomatic agendas. With Korea's globally recognized quarantine experience and system as assets, local governments' experience in implementation opens possibilities for urban diplomacy. Korea's proactive early response quarantine system experience has played a substantive role in building quarantine systems in Asia through urban diplomacy, exemplified by Seoul's open, multi-layered, cooperative complex urban diplomacy (Yoon & Son, 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic reminded us that openness and cooperation are more effective than isolation and unilateralism in resolving human security issues.

The rise of health issues as a major agenda for overcoming the limitations of local government international administration could serve as a valuable asset for peace urban diplomacy. By leveraging quarantine experience to form health councils with global local governments and promoting local public diplomacy through urban diplomacy, a "moment of peace" could be created. The 'Seoul-Pyongyang City Cooperation: Three Areas, Ten Tasks' consists of three areas—socio-cultural exchange, economic and development cooperation, and urban infrastructure cooperation—and ten tasks, including cultural sports, industrial cooperation, e-government, forestry cooperation, environmental cooperation, health cooperation, urban regeneration and planning, road and transportation, urban safety, and water and sewage. While the specific project contents of these ten tasks do not differ from the policies Seoul has exported or shared with other cities, they cannot be placed on the same plane as Seoul-Pyongyang cooperation projects due to the unique inter-Korean context. Linking Seoul-Pyongyang cooperation projects with Seoul's urban diplomacy could, on a macro level, foster reconciliation and peace on the Korean Peninsula and Northeast Asia, and on a micro level,

overcome the limitations of bilateral inter-Korean exchanges at the local government level by establishing a cooperation model involving sister and friendly cities and international organizations (Lee, 2018: 51). The Seoul-Pyongyang exchange projects ultimately aim for peace, reconciliation, and prosperity on the Korean Peninsula.

While urban diplomacy cannot entirely exclude partisan characteristics shaped by political interests, it can advance stable urban diplomacy policies that consider citizens' lives in areas directly affecting them, such as transportation, environment, health, and medical care.

IV. Conclusion: The Possibility of Peace and Urban diplomacy on the Korean Peninsula

The horizontal expansion of the security concept and the atomization of subjects have directed roles towards local governments, assigning them the responsibility to protect citizens' survival and happiness. This includes social disasters and the consideration of bilateral and multilateral diplomacy in the form of peace urban diplomacy by local governments. Given that the primary and direct victims of interstate conflicts reside in cities, local governments are best positioned to understand citizens' needs in rebuilding war-torn cities, providing inherent legitimacy to urban diplomacy in pursuing peace.

In addressing the urgent national task of resolving inter-Korean relations peacefully, Korea's urban diplomacy holds intrinsic legitimacy and identity. Government policies aimed at improving inter-Korean relations have often been influenced by ideology, political judgment, and dependency on international politics, making tangible achievements challenging. Conversely, there was a period when local governments were actively discussed due to their freedom from political and military issues. Initiatives such as the "Seoul-Pyongyang Comprehensive City Cooperation Plan" and expanded cooperation funds during the PyeongChang Olympics, along with various peace projects by border area local governments like Gyeonggi-do and Gangwon-do, exemplify this. These entities have disseminated peace discourse as 'peace creators' and 'peace builders', focusing on regional roles rather than ideological propagation. Regardless of visible outcomes, the recognition and attempt by local governments as an entity and role in peace urban diplomacy deserve evaluation.

However, currently, both unification and peace on the Korean Peninsula are becoming taboo subjects. In 2022, the Korean Peninsula became a site for military exercises by South Korea-US or South Korea-US-Japan, and a platform for missile launch threats by North Korea. In a situation where even the opportunity to open dialogue is absent, discussing peace is permitted only for those who have forgotten. Local governments, which had maintained peace discourse disconnected by the government and sought to sustain exchanges with 'sincerity', have become politically indifferent since the last local elections. For political opportunists, peace without achievement holds no significance.

Peace is not pursued due to left or right ideologies, political interests, or for political achievements, as it is never complete. This is especially true for inter-Korean relations. Persistently fulfilling the peaceful role is the duty of local governments to their citizens and the realization of grassroots democracy. Such expectations are held for Gyeonggi-do, which has consistently cultivated this role.

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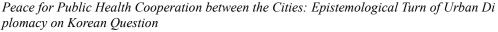
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