

# ISSUE BRIEF

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## Sweden's Role on the Korean Peninsula: Protecting Power, Mediator and Peacemaker

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## **Introduction**

“We thank the government of Sweden for its diplomatic role serving as the protecting power for the United States in the DPRK and to the government of the People’s Republic of China for its assistance in facilitating the transit of Private King,” stated U.S. National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan on the September 27, 2023 release of Travis King, who had dashed into the DPRK on July 18. The effort to win his release saw Sweden communicate the DPRK’s willingness to expel King early month, and Swedish representatives drove King from the DPRK into China, where he was welcomed by the U.S. and Sweden Ambassador and a Department of Defense representative. Sullivan described the State Department as “connecting with Sweden on a very regular basis working out details and working across” interagency and multiple department processes to secure the release.

Sweden's involvement on the Korean Peninsula comprises multiple significant aspects: its role as a protecting power for the United States (as well as Australia and Canada) in North Korea, its role in the Neutral Nations Supervisory Commission (NNSC), and its active participation in the Korean peace process. In advancing its historical neutrality, Sweden has taken on the critical responsibility of safeguarding the interests of multiple countries, facilitating communication, and providing essential consular services for their citizens in an isolated North Korea. Additionally, Sweden's reputation as an impartial mediator has made it a valuable player in mediating and in fostering dialogue on Peninsula affairs and cooperation between North and South Korea. This brief examines the context and implications of Sweden's role on the Korean Peninsula.

## **Historical Context and Establishment of Relations**

Sweden has been active in the Korean Peninsula’s modern history. During the Korean War, Sweden provided a mobile field hospital in Busan with a team of 160 medical personnel. Sweden later agreed to serve as one of four nations comprising the NNSC, established as part of the Korean Armistice Agreement. Sweden and North Korea established diplomatic relations in 1973, and Stockholm an embassy in Pyongyang in 1975, setting a foundation for their interactions over the decades that followed.

The establishment of relations allowed Sweden to engage in a pragmatic and constructive dialogue with North Korea, laying the groundwork for its future role as a mediator in the region. Over the years, Sweden's consistent diplomatic engagement and neutrality have contributed to maintaining an open channel of communication, even during periods of heightened tensions between North Korea and other nations.

## Sweden as a U.S. Protecting Power

The concept of a protecting power dates back to the Geneva Convention of 1929, which aimed to regulate the treatment of prisoners of war during armed conflicts. The role of a protecting power evolved over time to encompass representation and mediation in diplomatic matters. When two countries lack formal diplomatic relations, a third country—the protecting power—acts as a mediator to facilitate dialogue, protect interests, and provide necessary consular services.

Sweden's role is that of a protecting power for the United States, as well as for Australia and Canada. As a communication channel between the concerned countries, Sweden conveys messages, proposals, and diplomatic initiatives, reducing the risk of miscommunication and misunderstanding. In fulfilling this role, Sweden also helps protect and advance the political, economic and consular interests of these nations in North Korea. It has proved valuable in:

### *Facilitating Communication during Diplomatic Standoffs*

Sweden plays a critical role in facilitating communication between the United States, Australia, Canada, and North Korea during periods of heightened tensions or diplomatic standoffs. Direct communication between these nations may be difficult or impossible in such situations, making Sweden's role as a neutral third party indispensable in relaying messages and facilitating dialogue.

### *Ensuring Consular Services for Citizens*

The presence of the Swedish Embassy in Pyongyang ensures that U.S., Australian and Canadian citizens in North Korea have access to essential consular services. This includes issuing travel documents, providing assistance during emergencies, and facilitating the safe repatriation of citizens when necessary. Sweden's consular support ensures that citizens from these countries are not left without necessary assistance and protection in North Korea.

### *Monitoring Human Rights Concerns*

Sweden, as a country with a reputation for upholding human rights, monitors those issues within North Korea.

### *Facilitating Humanitarian Aid and Assistance*

Sweden's role as a protecting power enables it to facilitate humanitarian aid and assistance on behalf of the United States, Australia, and Canada. By engaging with North Korean authorities and international organizations, Sweden can advocate for and coordinate humanitarian efforts in areas such as food security, healthcare and education.

### *Promoting Regional Stability and Conflict Resolution*

As a neutral intermediary, Sweden contributes to promoting regional stability on the Korean Peninsula. Its diplomatic efforts help prevent misunderstandings or escalations between countries and facilitate conflict resolution during times of tension. By fostering an environment of dialogue, Sweden plays a key role in reducing the risk of crises that could affect regional stability.

### *Contributing to Denuclearization Talks*

Sweden's impartiality and diplomatic expertise position it to contribute to efforts for denuclearization on the Korean Peninsula. As North Korea's nuclear program remains a major concern for the United States and the international community, Sweden's diplomatic engagement can help advance dialogue and negotiations on denuclearization.

## **Sweden and the NNSC**

The Neutral Nations Supervisory Commission (NNSC) was established as part of the Korean Armistice Agreement, signed on July 27, 1953 and ending the active hostilities of the Korean War. The NNSC was one of the provisions included in the armistice to oversee the implementation of the agreement and to monitor the ceasefire between North Korea and the United Nations Command representing South Korea and the international forces supporting it.

The NNSC was agreed upon in the armistice negotiations as a measure to prevent future hostilities and maintain the ceasefire. The commission was intended to be an impartial body, comprising representatives from neutral countries, to monitor and supervise the implementation of the armistice terms. The four neutral countries chosen to participate in the NNSC were Sweden, Switzerland, Poland and Czechoslovakia (later represented by the Czech Republic and Slovakia). These countries were known for their tradition of neutrality and non-alignment in international conflicts, making them suitable candidates to carry out the commission's duties. The NNSC supervises the demilitarized zone (DMZ) and ensures that both sides adhere to the agreed-upon limits on military forces and weaponry. It also aims to facilitate communication between the parties and prevent any potential escalation of hostilities.

*Personnel and Leadership:* Sweden has been actively involved in the NNSC by providing personnel to serve as observers and supervisors within the DMZ. These personnel are typically military officers or diplomats with expertise in monitoring and verification. Sweden has also taken on leadership roles within the commission, including holding key positions such as the commission chairman.

*Regular Inspections:* Sweden, along with the other NNSC member countries, participates in regular inspections and visits to military installations and points of interest in the DMZ. These inspections aim to verify compliance with the armistice terms and ensure that both sides maintain the agreed-upon limits on military forces and equipment.

*Conflict Resolution and Mediation:* The NNSC, including Sweden, plays a role in facilitating communication and conflict resolution between North Korea and the United Nations Command during times of heightened tension or incidents along the DMZ. The presence of neutral observers can help defuse situations and prevent misunderstandings from escalating into conflicts.

*Humanitarian Assistance:* Although the NNSC's primary focus is on military matters, there have been instances where the commission has been involved in humanitarian efforts. For example, the commission has facilitated the repatriation of prisoners of war and assisted with humanitarian aid distribution during natural disasters.

*Contributions to Diplomacy:* Sweden's involvement in the NNSC also extends to its contributions to diplomatic efforts in resolving the Korean conflict. The commission's reports and findings can provide valuable insights and information to international actors involved in peace negotiations and diplomatic initiatives.

## **Sweden as Peacemaker**

As a neutral and reliable mediator, Sweden has established a reputation for promoting dialogue and conflict resolution in various global contexts. This reputation enhances its credibility as a mediator in the highly complex and sensitive dynamics between North Korea and other regional stakeholders.

Sweden also has been an attractive choice for both North and South Korea to communicate through during periods of heightened tensions or diplomatic standoffs. Swedish diplomats have played an essential role in engaging in back-channel talks, shuttling messages between the two Koreas, and providing a platform for constructive dialogue.

Sweden played a crucial role in 2018 in the lead-up to the historic summit between North Korean leader Kim Jong Un and then South Korean President Moon Jae-in at the DMZ. Prior to the summit, Swedish officials met with North Korean representatives in Stockholm, paving the way for discussions between the two Korean leaders. Sweden's behind-the-scenes involvement showcased its ability to foster an environment of trust and openness, even amidst long standing hostilities. Sweden also offered strong support for the exchange of liaison offices between the

DPRK and ROK, providing a direct communication channel aimed at easing tensions and fostering an atmosphere of greater understanding. Once past current political impasses, such entities have the potential to expand processes toward integration.

Sweden also brings a vital braintrust and intellectual history to negotiation and peacemaking on the Peninsula. In light of its active diplomacy, Stockholm has built a strong human resource capacity within its Foreign Ministry, as well as through its think tank and university communities. The Swedish Institute of International Affairs (UI), established in 1938 and an independent platform for research and information on foreign affairs and international relations, and the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), founded in 1966 and providing data, analysis and recommendations on armed conflict, military expenditure, the arms trade, and disarmament and arms control, are among Nordic and global leaders in peace studies.

Sweden's capacity toward peacemaking has been on active display in its support of United Nations initiatives and good offices. Since 2018, it has served as a key partner for the UN programme to support cooperation in Northeast Asia, aimed at advancing engagement.

## **Looking Forward**

Sweden's unique and crucial role in North Korea provides for creative approaches to further peace initiatives on the Korean Peninsula. Leveraging its reputation as a trusted diplomatic player, its longstanding engagement with North Korea and strength by way of technological innovation, Sweden is well suited to lend itself to advances in dialogue, confidence-building measures and humanitarian efforts. Areas for innovative approach might include:

### *Track 1.5 Dialogue on Humanitarian Issues*

Sweden remains well placed to host specialized Track 1.5 dialogues specifically focused on humanitarian issues in North Korea. By bringing together representatives from governments, international organizations, and non-governmental experts, Sweden can facilitate discussions on ways to address food security, healthcare, education and other pressing humanitarian concerns. These dialogues could also explore ways to enhance people-to-people exchanges and cultural diplomacy, fostering understanding and goodwill between North Korea and the international community.

### *Expanding Economic and Trade Ties*

Sweden is well placed to explore opportunities for economic and trade engagement with North Korea. By providing economic incentives and promoting trade relations, Sweden

may encourage North Korea to consider alternative paths to prosperity and development, reducing its dependence on nuclear capabilities. This approach could be pursued in alignment with international sanctions and denuclearization efforts.

#### *Promoting Environmental Cooperation*

Environmental challenges are global concerns that transcend political boundaries. Sweden, with its expertise in sustainable development and environmental conservation, can collaborate with North Korea on joint environmental projects. By addressing shared environmental challenges, such as climate change and natural resource management, Sweden can foster cooperation and mutual understanding between North Korea and the international community.

#### *Cultural Diplomacy and Exchanges*

Cultural diplomacy can play a crucial role in building bridges between nations with strained relations. Sweden's rich cultural heritage and soft power assets could be leveraged to promote cultural exchanges with North Korea. Facilitating cultural events, art exhibitions and academic exchanges could foster cross-cultural understanding and pave the way for deeper dialogue on broader issues.

#### *Innovative Use of Technology for Diplomacy*

In the digital age, technology offers new avenues for diplomacy and communication. Given its strengths in this area, Sweden could explore the use of virtual platforms and digital diplomacy to facilitate secure and direct communication between North Korea and other stakeholders. Technology-based initiatives could also enhance transparency and monitoring in areas such as human rights and nuclear disarmament.

### **Conclusion**

As a protecting power, mediator and advocate for peace on the Korean Peninsula, Sweden's role is crucial in navigating complex international relations. Through creative and innovative approaches advanced through both official and unofficial channels, and given its remarkable dedication and braintrust, Sweden will continue to contribute to peace and stability there.

Although the political landscape is increasingly complex and Sweden's NATO membership has the potential to challenge (if even implicitly) notions of its historical neutrality, Sweden's dedication to pursuing peace on the Korean Peninsula remains strong. Its continued efforts in creative peacemaking initiatives have made a lasting impact in the pursuit of peace and

reconciliation, promoting stability and cooperation in one of the world's most significant and sensitive regions.

#### Readings

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