

# Sweden's Engagement with the Democratic People's Republic of Korea

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## Structured Abstract

Article Type: Research paper

*Purpose*—This article examines Sweden's engagement with the DPRK as a unique case to understand motivations for engaging in a so-called fragile state.

*Design/methodology/approach*—The authors apply the constructivist international relations (IR) approach and opt for the case study method based on semi-structured interviews of individuals who have taken part in Swedish engagement programs.

*Findings*—Besides having its embassy in Pyongyang and serving as a protecting power for the U.S., Sweden has provided capacity building programs for North Korean government officials and scholars and has taken part in low-profile human rights advocacy. In short, Sweden is best viewed as a facilitator between DPRK and the outside world. Its motivations are mixed and multiple, including rationalist pursuit of gains and the logic of appropriateness.

*Practical implications*—Useful for policymakers interested in engagement DPRK and other countries with little interaction with the outside world.

*Originality/value*—This case expands our understanding of engagement that is often understood to a great degree as a rationalist affair between the engaging and target states. It also affirms the usefulness of constructivist IR approach in accounting

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for today's engagement practices involving more stakeholders and less obvious cost-benefit calculation.

Key words: Sweden, capacity building, constructivism, DPRK, engagement, fragile state, foreign policy, North Korea, Sweden

## Introduction

As a foreign policy, it has become more common to engage in the affairs of other states—especially those exhibiting multiple conditions of fragility—via channels such as political dialogue, peace-building missions, and development aid. This article focus on what keeps an external state engaged in the affairs of another state despite its multiple conditions of fragility. It aims to understand how the concept of engagement is perceived and operationalized in the engaging state from studying the case of Sweden's engagement with the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK).

In the first section, this article's theoretical approach—the constructivist approach—is discussed. Section two explores academic literatures on engagement and on state fragility. After briefly introducing the case to be studied, section three provides a historical overview of the Sweden-DPRK relations pre-millennium as contextual background. Analysis of Swedish engagement efforts in view of the DPRK's three gaps are discussed in the section four. Section five concludes by discussing the prospect of Swedish engagement and reflections from this research.

## Constructivist International Relations Approach

Constructivism has gained theoretical prominence as a complementary critique to the realist logic in explaining a state's approach to international relations (IR). Realists see the state's interest as defined in terms of power. They highlight security and survival as every state's principal concerns, and focus on discovering objective laws to explain state behavior in international politics. Realists believe the anarchic structure of the international system constrains states to either compete for dominance or to balance power or threat.<sup>1</sup> Together with liberals, they argue that the basis for such competitive nature of states is the logic of rational choice.<sup>2</sup>

Constructivists provide complementary insights. Their ontological standpoint views that the social world is constructed via "intersubjectively and collectively meaningful structures and processes"; even the realist premise of an anarchic world is viewed as a constructed condition.<sup>3</sup> Contrary to the neorealist argument that structures constrain actors and not vice versa, constructivists believe such influence works both ways.<sup>4</sup> Actors collectively assign meanings to the structures they belong to, and these meanings constitute and constrain the structures. Based on this reasoning, constructivists claim the international system is shaped by reasons other than the

struggle for power. They view ideas, norms, and shared understandings as important drivers of state actions in IR that traditional realists have overlooked. Constructivists have also revisited key realist IR concepts such as anarchy and self-help.<sup>5</sup>

## Conceptualizing Engagement

The constructivist IR approach is useful when accounting for complex political changes often overshadowed by broadly defined catch-all terms such as “engagement.” The term engagement has frequently appeared in foreign policy and international relations discussions but often without clever conceptualization.<sup>6</sup> Some scholars broadly define it as a foreign policy strategy to affect a change in the target state’s behaviors (i.e., Johnston and Ross 1999; Haass and O’Sullivan 2000; Kahler and Kastner 2006).<sup>7</sup> It is also viewed as a post-Cold War project to integrate an isolated country peacefully into the international order and the global economy (i.e., Shambaugh 1996; Gill 1999).<sup>8</sup> Some scholars frame the engagement as a counter-concept to containment or as an effort to shift away from foreign policies that aimed to contain a target state (Lord and Lynch 2010).<sup>9</sup> A skeptical version assumes that a target state will not fundamentally change so engagement should aim to offer carrots for compliance while simultaneously pursuing an engaging state’s own military build-up.<sup>10</sup>

Lately, the term engagement has been adopted beyond its bilateral foreign policy context. The term is also widely employed to describe international cooperation efforts. The attacks of September 11, 2001, alarmed the Western world and made it realize that sources of global insecurity grow nationally in countries where state institutions are unable to deliver necessary goods and services to citizens (i.e., De biel et al. 2005; Menocal 2011; Nussbaum et al. 2012).<sup>11</sup> Given this awareness, major donor countries represented by the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) began speaking about “international engagement”; this concept highlights their roles in facilitating, not replacing, national reformers in fragile states to “build effective, legitimate and resilient institutions, capable of engaging productively with their people.”<sup>12</sup> Compared to engagement in the bilateral context, this international version has a normative pretext of engagement. Under the banner of international engagement, stronger states are called to move beyond the calculation of short-term national interests and to help weaker states for mutual survival. Engagers are advised only to assist, not to dominate, because people of the target state should champion their own ways out of poverty and conflict.

## Conceptualizing a Fragile State or State Fragility

There are a plethora of labels for a problem state—fragile, failed, failing, weak, underperforming, and collapsed, to name a few. Two of the most internationally

recognized terms are failed and fragile states. The concept of a failed state gained scholarly attention in the wake of increased civil wars, ethnic conflicts, and other problems post-Cold War.<sup>13</sup> Early definitions of the failed state point to symptoms such as the state's inability to sustain itself, dominance of local powers and militia, poverty, social disorder, lawlessness, and failure to control borders.<sup>14</sup> Gros adds that a failed state is consistently unable to protect its citizens,<sup>15</sup> and Rotberg argues that failed states like Somalia and the two Sudans exhibit "endured violence."<sup>16</sup>

The international community has committed a tremendous volume of material and non-material assistances to states deemed failing, and central authorities of such states like Afghanistan have continued to exist, albeit weakly or ineffectively.<sup>17</sup> Instead, "fragile" has been more commonly used by international development actors. Two widely-used definitions have been proposed by the OECD and the World Bank. The OECD views a fragile state as "unable to meet its population's expectations or manage changes in expectations and capacity through the political process."<sup>18</sup> The World Bank applies quantitative criteria based on state performance in economic management, structural policies, policies for social inclusion and equity, and public sector management and institutions.<sup>19</sup>

In the 2000s, the discourse on failed and fragile states faced criticism. Critiques problematize an underlying connotation of these terms as if there is a static, predetermined end that a fragile or failed state should have met but was unsuccessful.<sup>20</sup> Scholars such as Call (2008) and van Overbeek (2009) argue that the rhetoric of a state failure or fragility is considered politically stigmatizing and exhibits a Western bias and paternalistic overtone.<sup>21</sup> A coping strategy in lieu of the wholesale rejection is to modify or unpack this contested concept. Development agencies now employ a broader concept such as "fragility" or "situations of fragility." The label "fragile state" creates the confusion that fragility is a condition specific to certain problematic states. By separating fragility from statehood, the alternatives above can remove a country bias.<sup>22</sup> Some critical scholars define fragility as a set of shortages in service, security, and legitimacy.<sup>23</sup> From a North Korean perspective the label "fragile state" is condemned in state propaganda. As a counter-reaction, official media outlets such as the Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) focus attention on providing a view showing military strength, advanced technological capacity and unity within the country.

## Introducing the Case and Defining Key Concepts

In view of the discussions on engagement and state fragility, this article focuses on Sweden's engagement with the DPRK as a unique case.<sup>24</sup> The DPRK is one of the countries with which Western states are least engaged, marked with long-lasting poverty and political repression. Triggered by a sharp decrease in food production as well as inefficient delivery of food, a famine hit the country in 1994 and claimed the lives of between 250,000 to 1.17 million people.<sup>25</sup> Since then, the DPRK suffers from weak food security, a failure to deliver needed goods to its citizens (which

resulted in making the informal economy thrive), widespread bribery,<sup>26</sup> and limited civil liberties.<sup>27</sup> Yet, Sweden has maintained diplomatic ties with the country since 1973 and has offered various forms of assistance to facilitate the DPRK's stability and its linkage to the outside world. Given that such practice may appear counter-intuitive, especially to the realist and rationalist camp of IR, it is not only interesting to study in its own right but can enrich the current understanding of engagement by examining underlying political calculations as well as social forces.

The authors endorse Resnick's (2001) definition of engagement and Call's (2011) definition of fragility. Unlike many other conceptualizers, Resnick highlights engagement as an "exchange relationship," recognizing the target state's agency in shaping engagement outcomes and increased interdependence between the engager and the target.<sup>28</sup>

### Three conditions to make engagement work as an effective foreign policy

- The initial degree of contact between the sender and target states must be low.
- The target state has a significant need for material resources or reputational power.
- The sender state and the international community are perceived as having material or reputational resources that the target state desires.

Source: Resnick (2001: p. 560–561)

Regarding fragility, Call rephrases it as gaps in capacity, security, and legitimacy (see the box below for an elaboration of each gap). He remains cautious in prescribing strategies to address such gaps. Firstly, there is no universal agreement on what capacity, security, or legitimacy respectively mean. Even though each gap is inter-related, the gap cannot be conflated as a direct cause for other gaps or fragility as a whole. Operationalizing his definition therefore necessitates giving due consideration to political, historical, social, and cultural contexts of a concerned state.<sup>29</sup>

### Three gaps of fragility

- Capacity gap: when state institutions are "incapable of delivering minimal public goods and services to the population" (with a context-specific understanding on the degree of being "minimal").
- Security gap: when state institutions "do not provide minimal levels of security in the face of organized armed groups."
- Legitimacy gap: when "a significant portion of its political elites and society reject the rules regulating the exercise of power and the accumulation and distribution of wealth."

Source: Call (2011: p. 306–308)

Considering these, Sweden's engagement with the DPRK in this article is delineated as: *Swedish government-supported activities toward the DPRK across multiple issue*

*areas, with an aim to influence the target state's political behaviors in ways conducive to address its gaps in capacity, security, and legitimacy.*

## **Research Methodology**

This article is qualitative research based on an extensive study of published secondary materials in English, Korean, and Swedish. The second author conducted semi-structured interviews of individuals who have taken part in Swedish engagement programs. Interviewees were guaranteed full confidentiality of their names and professional associations. The authors treated their statements in a way so that their identities cannot be inferred. A total of six respondents were interviewed in April and May 2013. Each interview lasted from 30 minutes to one-and-a-half hours. The majority of interview questions were commonly applied, with a few tailored in view of each respondent's responsibilities. Interviewees include: one member of the Swedish Parliament, two senior-level officials in the Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), and three practitioners who have organized training programs for North Koreans. Even in Sweden, a country known for open access to public information, details on its engagement with the DPRK are kept confidential to avoid unnecessary publicity and negative repercussions on its cooperation with DPRK counterparts. Engagement actors were cautious about revealing their work; some declined to be interviewed despite guarantee of confidentiality.

### **Case Study: Sweden's Engagement in View of the DPRK's Conditions of Fragility**

#### *A Brief History Before the 2000s*

Sweden made its first official presence in the DPRK in 1953 as a member state of the Neutral Nations Supervisory Commission (NNSC) together with Switzerland, Poland, and Czechoslovakia. In the early 1970s, Sweden forged ties with the DPRK for economic interests. At that time, the DPRK attempted rapid industrial development and began importing the required production equipment. Swedish exporters made contracts to sell cars, trucks, and other heavy machines, a total of \$125 million (U.S.) in the currency value of that time. To facilitate business transactions, eager Swedish businessmen pushed the Ministry for Foreign Affairs (MFA) to establish an embassy in Pyongyang. The embassy was established in 1975 and still exists to this day.<sup>30</sup>

Stories of Swedish engagement with the DPRK in the 1980s are few, attesting to general inactivity during the period. In addition to the decline in bilateral economic exchanges, the diplomatic scandal in 1976 that DPRK embassies in the Nordic countries were caught selling alcohol and cigarettes in the black market froze the country's bilateral relations with these countries.<sup>31</sup> Nevertheless, Sweden remained

engaged with the DPRK, in part to remind the country of its economic duty.<sup>32</sup> Continuing this controversial relationship with DPRK during the Cold War was not an exceptional decision at that time. During Olof Palme's Social Democratic regime (1969–1976 and 1982–1986) that publicly declared an anti-Imperialist stance, Sweden expanded its diplomatic relations with North Vietnam, Laos, and other nations where Western democracies were least engaged.<sup>33</sup>

In the early 1990s Sweden considered withdrawing its presence from the DPRK but that did not happen. The 1994 Agreed Framework was signed between the U.S. and the DPRK, stipulating the replacement of the DPRK's nuclear power plant program with light water reactor power plants and progressive normalization of bilateral relations. The Agreed Framework was understood as an impending sign of hope and imminent peace, followed by the U.S. government's request in 1995 for Sweden to serve as its protecting power in the DPRK.<sup>34</sup> Until 2001, Sweden was the only Western country to have an embassy in Pyongyang. During the late 1990s, it was a protecting power for the U.S., Australia, Germany, and Canada.<sup>35</sup> Coincidentally, the famine broke in the early 1990s, and Sweden decided to stay and assist with famine relief. With this historical backdrop, we now turn to examine Swedish engagement in the 2000s in view of the DPRK's gaps in capacity, security, and legitimacy.

### *Addressing the Capacity Gap: Cautiously and Consistently*

As Call notes, it is empirically hard to address one gap without affecting others, but addressing each gap requires a distinctive logic.<sup>36</sup> Mindful of this complexity in reality, this section arbitrarily categorize Swedish engagement activities in view of the three gaps. Call argues that an engaging state should assist a target state in strengthening its state institutions so that they can regain control over and exercise an effective delivery of core public goods and services.<sup>37</sup> In this regard, Sweden has addressed the DPRK's capacity gap largely in two ways: humanitarian aid and capacity-building programs.

The DPRK's famine prompted Sweden to step out of its long period of inactivity. Sweden provided aid for famine relief which amounted to \$10 million (U.S.). It became a major single country donor after the U.S., Japan, and the ROK.<sup>38</sup> Since then, Swedish aid commitment has remained consistent and steady in volume even when other donors dramatically reduced aid due to DPRK's nuclear tests in 2006 and 2009 (as illustrated in Table 1). As the U.S., the ROK, and Japan halted bilateral aid, Sweden became one of the top single country donors toward the late 2000s. Its aid is delivered mostly via multilateral channels (i.e., the UN) to support their operations and NGO programs in food security, agriculture, and increasingly the health sectors.<sup>39</sup> Figure 1<sup>40</sup> clearly shows Sweden's aid contribution in relation to other, mainly European, donors.

Although numerical figures regarding aid to the DPRK are published, the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency's (SIDA) overall scheme



	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006
% of total aid	1,5	0,7	0,8	2,5	3,8	9,4	12,7
Funding (USD millions)	3,428,506	2,807,473	2,744,366	4,499,240	11,543,114	4,325,028	5,071,133
Ranking as single state donor	6	8	5	7	4	2	2
	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	
% of total aid	5,4	7,3	22,9	3,5	10,1	3	
Funding (USD millions)	5,528,635	4,154,932	14,056,315	850,543	9,007,449	3,495,158	
Ranking as single state donor	3	5	2	4	1	7	

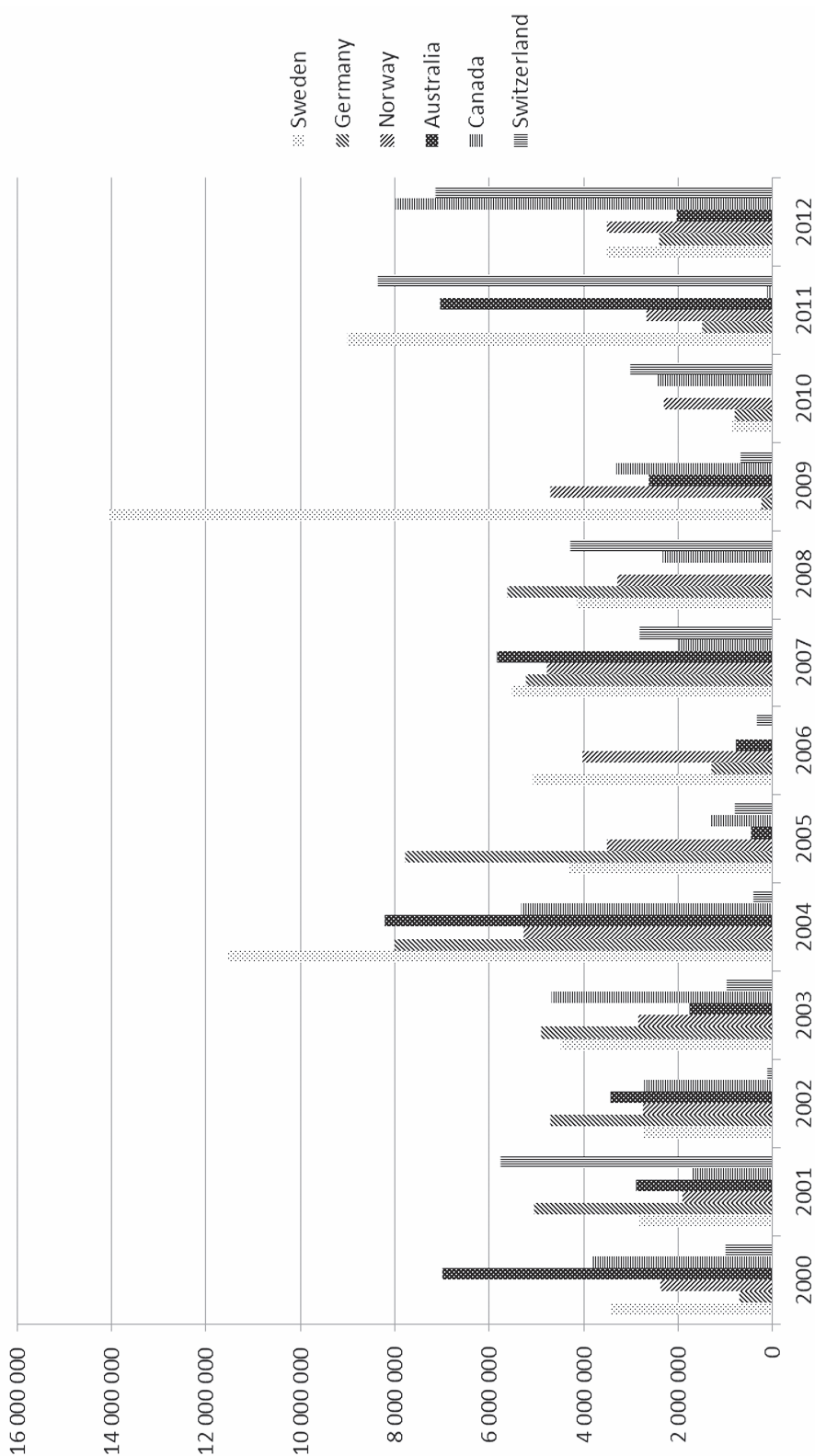
**Table 1. Sweden's humanitarian aid contribution 2000–2012**

of development cooperation strategies allows non-disclosure of specific activities. The DPRK, along with other politically sensitive countries, belongs to a special category where development strategies are decided case-by-case due to the practical difficulty of pursuing standard state-to-state cooperation.<sup>41</sup>

Capacity-building programs for DPRK officials and scholars compose another hallmark of Swedish engagement. In the late 1990s, the DPRK asked Sweden to provide training on Western economic thinking programs; this preparation was accelerated when Swedish Prime Minister Göran Persson visited Pyongyang in 2001.<sup>42</sup> Since Sweden chaired the EU council that year, Persson also brought EU Troika (refers to the Minister of Foreign Affairs of its member state holding the presidency of the Council of Ministers, the Secretary-General of the EU Council, and the European Commissioner for External Relations) to Pyongyang and contributed to the establishment of a EU-DPRK diplomatic relationship.<sup>43</sup> Since the establishment of EU-DPRK diplomatic relations in 2001, 26 EU member states have followed suit (except France and Estonia). Seven of them have resident embassies in Pyongyang—Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Germany, Poland, Romania, Sweden, and the UK.<sup>44</sup> Until recently, Sweden has offered knowledge transfer programs aimed at addressing various skill needs of North Koreans. The following list overviews some long-running programs.

- From 2002 to 2009, the European Institute of Japanese Studies (EIJIS) at the Stockholm School of Economics arranged two-week-long workshops for DPRK policy planners and academics. These workshops were held in Vietnam. Each workshop provided lectures covering a wide range of topics on economic modernization, including basic accounting, management, international trade, and Vietnam's economic reform experiences.<sup>45</sup> EIJS has had relationships with research institutes in countries transitioning from a centrally-planned economy to market economy; previously, this institute designed capacity-building programs for policymakers in Vietnam, Lao PDR, and China to assist their reform programs.





- The International Council of Swedish Industry (Näringslivets Internationella Råd, NIR) brings DPRK participants to Stockholm. They attend seminars on different topics of market economy and Swedish economic mechanisms, and visit Swedish companies and organizations.<sup>46</sup>

- Since 2005, a Stockholm-based research institute, the Institute for Security and Development Policy (ISDP), has hosted North Korean researchers from the Institute for Disarmament and Peace (IDP). The IDP is a think tank under the DPRK Foreign Ministry. Invited researchers stay up to one month at the ISDP to engage in academic exchanges and to publish academic papers. In May 2012, the ISDP initiated a workshop on topics of crisis management incorporating topical seminars given by researchers from the ISDP and the Swedish Armed Forces. Participants also visited various think tanks and government agencies.<sup>47</sup>

- SIDA's International Training Programmes (ITP) has engaged North Koreans by providing courses to cater to the skills needs of managerial-level officials and individuals from developing countries around the world.<sup>48</sup> In 2009, *Arbetarbladet*, a Swedish Social Democratic newspaper based north of Stockholm in Gävle, reported on two North Koreans taking ITP courses on urban land registration and Geographical Information System technology at the Swedish Ordnance Survey Agency (Lantmäteriet) in Gävle.<sup>50</sup> Reportedly, about 20 North Koreans annually took part in ITP.<sup>51</sup> In summary, Sweden has been cautiously yet consistently addressing the capacity gap via aid and educational outreach to North Korean elites and bureaucrats. There is some concern that knowledge transfer programs merely enhance the DPRK's governing power without effectively addressing its "exclusionary and authoritative tendencies" that Call views as gaps in internal legitimacy.<sup>52</sup> For example, the Christian Democrat parliamentarian Holger Gustafsson submitted a written question to the government, asking how it was ensuring the DPRK government effectively delivered Swedish aid so that it reached the populace in dire need.<sup>53</sup> It is not this article's ambition to evaluate the claimed trade-off between a capacity gap and a legitimacy gap, however. In a later section we discuss how Sweden has been responding to the latter gap.

### *Addressing the Security Gap: Facilitating Dialogue and Learning*

In the 2000s, the U.S. and the ROK shifted from pro-engagement bilateral approaches to multilateral approaches that prioritize denuclearization. Subsequently, the two countries have lost channels for direct communication and private exchanges and have been portrayed as enemies in the DPRK government's propaganda to its population and the world.<sup>54</sup> Call states that a security gap occurs when a state cannot secure "minimal levels of security in the face of organized armed groups."<sup>55</sup> While

#### **Opposite: Figure 1. Sweden's Humanitarian Aid Contribution 2000–2012**

Figure 1 excludes the three largest donors in accumulative aid volumes (the ROK, the U.S., and Japan). Numbers are in U.S. dollars. Both Table 1 and Figure 1 refer to UN OCHA (2000–2012).

the DPRK does not have such an imminent internal security threat, its leadership claims that their sovereignty is at risk due to the imperial ambitions of the U.S. and its allies.<sup>56</sup> Such an argument lays the rhetorical ground for the DPRK's military actions and nuclear ambitions, which destabilize regional and global securities. When the DPRK made military provocations, international opinions toward the DPRK government worsen, and engagement efforts and aid inflow diminish. Those who bear the costs of such repercussions are DPRK citizens. Food prices in shadow markets may soar due to supply shortage, which would trigger widespread lack of food provision at the household level. Citizens may be forced to participate more frequently in symbolic military campaigns against the imperial West, which comes at the cost of their time and effort on food provision and income-generating activities. Therefore, the DPRK's constructed sense of insecurity is a real concern because it offsets opportunities to enhance the livelihood and well being of individual citizens.

Sweden has been indirectly addressing this virtual gap by assuming a role of facilitator, most notably during Prime Minister Göran Persson's tenure from 1996 to 2006. After the historic summit between the two Koreas in 2000, when Dae-jung Kim the former ROK president and Nobel Peace laureate met with Persson, Kim expressed his wish for Sweden to arrange a EU high-level visit to Pyongyang. An interviewee presumed his suggestion was to provide a sign of sustainable commitment after the inter-Korean summit and to increase the DPRK's contact with the outside world, first with the approachable EU (Interviewee #1). Persson's administration was also motivated to launch training programs upon learning that Kim Jong-il had mentioned to the U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright his wish to learn about the Swedish Model.<sup>57</sup> After Persson's visit, to facilitate communications between the DPRK and major country stakeholders, the former Swedish ambassador to Pyongyang, Paul Beijer, served as the Special Advisor to the Swedish Government on Korean Peninsula Issues from 2006 to 2008.<sup>58</sup>

Through having a rare, long-standing Pyongyang embassy, Sweden provides services for other countries. Today Sweden is a protecting power for Australia, Canada, and the U.S. Sweden's services to Australia and Canada as a protecting power have changed in scope as a result of the establishment of diplomatic relations between these two countries and the DPRK. To date the tasks are mostly consular. Sweden handles consular representation for all Nordic countries and manages visa applications for citizens of Italy, Spain, and the Nordic countries. Sweden's guardianship for the U.S. came under a heavy media spotlight in 2009 when the Swedish ambassador had consular access to two American journalists detained in the DPRK for charges of illegal entry and engaging in "hostile" acts.<sup>59</sup> Besides the consular work and other tasks depending on the various upcoming needs of the U.S., Sweden as its protecting power looks after, briefs, and gives advice to humanitarian workers and visiting delegations from the U.S.<sup>60</sup> Swedish diplomats are sought after for their insight and knowledge on the DPRK, upon meeting with its government officials.

## *Addressing the Legitimacy Gap: Two-Tiered Advocacy but Limits Abound*

According to Call, the DPRK is considered one of the least legitimate states, failing to provide the governing transparency and the space for citizens to freely express their opinions and thoughts.<sup>60</sup> In his view, addressing the legitimacy gap means to support “counterweights to exclusionary and authoritarian tendencies” of the ruling power.<sup>61</sup> In this regard, addressing human rights concerns in the target state is an inevitable task. The leadership in Pyongyang has resisted openly discussing domestic human rights issues since they view human rights discourse as an imperialist tool intended to interfere with internal affairs.<sup>62</sup>

Sweden once provided human rights training to North Korean delegates, but no such program is ongoing. Sweden has long engaged other Asian countries such as China, Laos, and Vietnam in human rights topics. SIDA has funded human rights training in these countries. Their officials and non-governmental entities have also come to Sweden to take courses on human rights. Since 2001, the Raoul Wallenberg Institute at Lund University received North Korean participants in its human rights education course offered via SIDA’S ITP.<sup>63</sup> In 2003, the DPRK withdrew from the program, citing the EU’s support for a UN resolution condemning its human rights situation as the reason.<sup>64</sup> When Sweden has occasional bilateral meetings with the DPRK, it reportedly raises human rights concerns. The former Swedish ambassador to the ROK, Lars Vargö, confirmed having bilateral human rights dialogues with the director of the Europe department within the DPRK Foreign Affairs Ministry. During the dialogue, Sweden urged the DPRK to accept a visit request by the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in North Korea and advised that the EU would positively consider the DPRK’s constitutional revision in 2008 that newly included the word “human rights” in view of an upcoming resolution concerning human rights situations in the DPRK.<sup>65</sup>

Interestingly, Sweden’s discreet bilateral human rights diplomacy coexists with its active participation in international advocacy demanding the DPRK government step up its human rights performance. Sweden has supported every UN resolution demanding the government protect and guarantee citizens’ rights. Recently, Sweden sponsored the draft statement of the UN Human Rights Council resolution to establish a commission of inquiry into human rights concerns in the DPRK.<sup>66</sup> In solidarity with other EU states, Sweden has implemented UN and EU economic sanctions and took part in EU-DPRK annual human rights and political dialogues from 1998 and 2004.<sup>67</sup>

Until now, Sweden has delicately balanced its bilateral and multilateral human rights diplomacies while the DPRK government remains resistant to having an open discussion about domestic human rights issues. Behind the DPRK’s reluctance, one can read its governing power’s fear that acknowledging domestic human rights problems may weaken their internal and external legitimacies. Sweden managed to address human rights concerns by credibly showing that it is not after a regime change.<sup>68</sup> Yet its engagement efforts and the impact felt by DPRK citizens will depend on the DPRK’s willingness to cooperate.

## *Facilitation as Engagement*

As mentioned previously, Sweden has established, enlarged, and at times scaled back its contact with the DPRK. Except for the capacity gap, for which Sweden initiated several training programs in addition to humanitarian aid, Sweden's effort has been limited in effectively addressing the two other gaps.

There is no single authoritative policy document that defines and guides Sweden's engagement activities to the DPRK. Instead, multiple documents released from the Swedish MFA such as the Sweden's Asia Strategy (1999) and the country report on DPRK (2011) commonly state that the country should be ready to assist the DPRK if it moves toward economic and political reforms.<sup>69</sup> The country report on the DPRK specifies: "[in] recent years, Sweden ... sought to contribute to increased transparency and the progressive integration of North Korea into the international community."<sup>70</sup>

Interviewees neatly sum up Sweden's engagement by saying Sweden has functioned as a "facilitator," a role strongly advocated and pursued under the Persson administration.<sup>71</sup> Being a facilitator differs from being a mediator who takes an active part in shaping a consensus or resolving a conflict as a third party. Sweden does not see the need to sit in on the Six-Party Talks (but encourages those directly involved in resuming the process) or offer to mediate, as the Swiss did, in the latest tension in the Korean Peninsula after the third nuclear test.<sup>72</sup> Instead, Sweden strives to be available should the DPRK government consider future gradual political and economic liberalization.<sup>73</sup> This facilitator mindset justifies continuing to host capacity-building programs, aimed mainly at "exposing" North Koreans to Western thinking and the outside world for reflective, comparative learning. Ensuring the full attainment of lecture subjects is a secondary concern.<sup>74</sup>

## **Unpacking Motivations for Swedish Engagement**

While Sweden may have aimed for a low-risk and not-so-ambitious mode of engagement by being a facilitator, it is still a difficult choice to maintain. Engaging with a country known for military provocations and poor records of human rights and development can potentially tarnish the reputation of the engaging state in the international community. What has motivated Sweden?

Few interviewed actors argue that Sweden's engagement is a rational choice and conducive to its national interest. For a small state like Sweden, engagement, not isolation, is a realistic strategy to assert its foreign policy influence in the world.<sup>75</sup> Other states engaging the DPRK have sought out Sweden for its long-standing knowledge of the country and existing networks with government officials.<sup>76</sup> In the long term, maintaining these unique ties can help Swedish businesses and other non-governmental actors achieve their own goals in the DPRK. As if to remind others of this, the NIR website states that its strategy is "to secure the long-term interest of Swedish business in complex markets.... By ensuring and establishing

presence in complex markets, NIR facilitates networks and represents Swedish business collectively in official and unofficial settings in all targeted markets.”<sup>77</sup>

A less explored realm of rationalizing engagement is how individuals involved in Swedish engagement programs make sense of their work, when it is difficult to see immediate feedback or outcome in the DPRK. Those who had witnessed North Koreans receiving training commonly spoke of rewarding moments, such as when they showed increased understanding of taught subjects, were eager to learn more and—even if rarely—were honest about what could be done better in their own country compared to what they had seen in other countries.<sup>78</sup> Such moments affirm the value of cultural exposure that leaves indelible impressions in the minds of North Korean elites. Furthermore, as the DPRK lacks so much knowledge and skill sets, demand for such training in the future can only grow.<sup>79</sup> These accounts illustrate that individuals involved in engagement programs find gratification at an individual level. Without this, operationalizing Sweden’s engagement scheme would have been unsustainable.

Nonetheless, aforementioned rational gains are not always foreseeable. In today’s world of politics a state cannot single-handedly pursue and achieve its foreign policy interests without affecting and being affected by other country stakeholders and supranational communities. As mentioned earlier, Sweden’s attempt to disengage was thwarted in the mid-1990s as it took on the role of a protecting power; if Sweden is to imagine future scenarios of disengagement, the same constraint will apply.<sup>80</sup> Sweden has to be mindful of its EU membership and of expected behaviors as a member state. After the DPRK’s third nuclear test, Swedish actors were asked to keep their engagement activities low-profile in order to send a clear, publicly unified message of EU disapproval.<sup>81</sup> Because of this interconnected nature of statecraft in the world politics, which affects Sweden’s foreign policy in regards to the DPRK, one interviewee stated that it has not always been clear what Sweden wanted from its relations with the DPRK.<sup>82</sup>

Instead, Sweden’s engagement has been sustained with the external demands placed on it. By meeting these expectations, Sweden and its unique leverage on the DPRK are perceived as “appropriate” by other states and the international community.<sup>83</sup> Unless domestic opposition to the current Swedish engagement with the DPRK outweighs the benefits of appropriateness, disengagement is unlikely in the near future.

### *Adaptability as Catalyst*

One could ask if the aforementioned endogenous and exogenous motivations for engagement also exist in other engaging states such as China, the ROK, and the U.S. Yet no other state has been as adaptable and self-transforming while maintaining the overall framework of engagement. In the past four decades, Sweden began its relations as a potential trade partner, then became a major aid donor, expanded its role as a dialogue broker, and is now serving as one of few remaining communication channels between the international community and the DPRK government.



At the individual level, Swedish actors have learned to work with North Koreans over time. Designing and operating training programs still involve a wide range of challenges. It is hardly possible to ensure attendance of North Korean participants until the last minute, and they generally lack base knowledge to be able to make sense of taught subjects.<sup>84</sup> Gradually, individuals organizing engagement programs have expected these challenges and embraced them as part of the deal, given that the DPRK government is highly sensitive toward exposing its elites to the Western world and ways of thinking.

Such a flexible learning curve at the individual level would not survive if it had to deal with inflexible bureaucracy or media publicity in Sweden.<sup>85</sup> Distancing the DPRK agenda from public scrutiny is a learned strategy. Swedish policy makers understand the cost of turning engagement with the DPRK into a domestic issue for open discussion. The DPRK is a low priority in Sweden's overall foreign policy, which also helps to avoid constant attention.

Such an engagement strategy is not easily applied to other states that have greater and more clearly-defined strategic interests in the DPRK. If an engaging state is vulnerable to the DPRK's security threats, has a closer distance between the policy making and the public opinion on the Korean Peninsular issues, and the idea of engaging DPRK is politicized in domestic politics, it is less feasible for the state to replicate Sweden's experience.<sup>86</sup>

## Current Status and Prospects

Sweden's engagement with the DPRK is likely to continue without a prospect of expanding or deepening its activities. Governing for two terms from 2006 to 2014, the Swedish conservative alliance (called *Alliansen*, formerly *Allians för Sverige*) consolidated its own foreign policy legacies differently from the policy of Social Democratic years. The image of Sweden as an independent opinion-maker and global activist has been fading. Swedish politicians across parties agree that Sweden's ability to win broad support in the UN has weakened.<sup>87</sup> Sweden is a close ally of the U.S. and acts in greater conformity to the EU (and thus to foreign policies of major European powers such as France, Germany, and the UK). Sweden pays less regional attention to Asia except China, a major trading partner.<sup>88</sup> Meanwhile, since the establishment of EU-DPRK diplomatic relations in 2001, other EU countries have established their own embassies in Pyongyang with more staff and resources than Sweden's embassy and are operating their own capacity-building programs; Sweden's comparative advantage has therefore decreased.<sup>89</sup> The latest nuclear testing and continued military provocations by the DPRK reversed the momentum of further engaging with the DPRK. The international community condemned the testing and strengthened economic sanctions against the country. Swedish training programs have been put on hold indefinitely as of June 2013.<sup>90</sup> An interviewee said that when the second nuclear test occurred in 2006, Sweden suspended its training programs for the DPRK for a year.



As long as military tension and the hostile inter-Korean atmosphere prevail, Sweden's leverage on the DPRK will remain weak and auxiliary. Its role as the facilitator of Western knowledge is now shared with a few other European states. China has come into the picture as the DPRK's main trading partner and messenger to the U.S. and the international community. Of course, some caveats, such as long historical ties to the DPRK government and its mandate as the protecting power for the U.S., are not easily replaced by other states. Therefore, Sweden will continue to serve as the facilitator between the DPRK and the outside world, but with much less visible activism when compared to the early 2000s.

## Theoretical Reflection

Sweden's engagement with the DPRK is a unique case in which motivations cannot be fully explored from the realist approach alone. The constructivist perspective complements this gap by adding the logic of appropriateness. This article also unpacked the scene of Sweden's self-serving nature to the individual level and revealed how individual actors sought meanings and values in their work. The constructivist approach, focusing on norms, ideas and shared understandings as important drivers of actions, can help us understand Sweden's engagement with the DPRK and its changing roles over the years, first as a potential trading partner, a companion in anti-imperialist stance during the Cold War, and then a facilitator between the DPRK and the international community.

The history of the relationship between the countries highlights emerging trade relations as a reason for the establishment of diplomatic representations, which can be interpreted as a struggle for economic benefits, i.e., increased power in an economic sense. This is clearly not the case today when increased trade relationships seem far from reality. Here Sweden's active engagement with countries transitioning from a centrally-planned economy to a market economy during the late 1980s and early 1990s can be translated into a norm to understand Sweden's role in its relations with DPRK. Possible changing development within the DPRK, with prospects of being a future actor taking the lead in reform programs, can serve as one reason for Swedish engagement. The case study adds value by jointly employing Resnick's engagement and Call's interpretation of fragility. Independently, each concept exhibits strengths as well as areas for updating. Resnick's engagement fits with the case because it emphasizes the dialectic nature of engagement. Nevertheless, it needs to include actors other than engaging and target states since contemporary issues calling for external engagement are regional or international in scale and/or impact. Call's analytical insight on fragility proves to be useful in identifying contextualized symptoms and corresponding responses. However, because his concept is based on states embroiled in internal conflict, it does not neatly explain the kind of security dilemma in the DPRK and its human security repercussions. Despite these, the concepts of engagement and of fragility as gaps turn out to be mutually complementary. Considering that the present trend in international engagement is increasingly

multilateral, norm-driven and intently aimed to work with states with fragility, both concepts can be employed to account for other cases of engagement.

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