



SWEDEN–DEMOCRATIC PEOPLE’S REPUBLIC OF KOREA DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS – A HISTORY

Sweden is frequently referred to as the “bridge to the West” of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK, commonly referred to as North Korea) due to its long-standing and reliable diplomatic presence in Pyongyang. Sweden was the first Western country to open an embassy in the DPRK in 1975, and it is still one of the few European nations with a presence there. Using its historical neutrality and stable engagement with Pyongyang, Sweden has taken on the crucial duty of promoting the interests of several countries involved in the security dynamics on the Korean Peninsula, particularly the United States of America (USA) and the Republic of Korea (ROK, commonly referred to as South Korea). This backgrounder outlines how Sweden has established itself as a reliable partner of the DPRK via ongoing engagement and constructive

communication. Sweden’s commitment has benefited other nations, particularly the U.S., by providing a key “window” into one of the world’s most isolated countries. Furthermore, Sweden as the protecting power of the U.S. has facilitated high-level dialogues between Washington and Pyongyang, as well as ensured the release of several American citizens.









This backgrounder delves deeper into the historical relationship between Sweden and the DPRK, with an emphasis on how Sweden’s role on the Korean Peninsula has developed as a result of its consistent engagement with Pyongyang. This includes Sweden’s Neutral Nations Supervisory Commission mandate, humanitarian assistance, and role as the Protecting Power of, among others, the United States.

Introduction

Sweden is frequently referred to as the “bridge to the West” of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK, commonly referred to as North Korea) due to its long-standing and reliable diplomatic presence in Pyongyang. Sweden was the first Western country to open an embassy in the DPRK in 1975, and it is still one of the few European nations with a presence there. Using its historical neutrality and stable engagement with Pyongyang, Sweden has taken on

the crucial duty of promoting the interests of several countries involved in the security dynamics on the Korean Peninsula, particularly the United States of America (USA) and the Republic of Korea (ROK, commonly referred to as South Korea). Such efforts include, Stockholm frequently hosting high-level, “off-the-record” meetings between DPRK officials and Western diplomats to de-escalate tensions, which includes the working-level talks leading up to the 2018 Trump-Kim summit.

Sweden-DPRK Diplomatic Relations: A History

Before 1950	<p>Before the 1950s, Sweden and the Korean Peninsula had shared nearly 200 years of informal contact. This includes exchanges between the two royal families and the discovery by then-Swedish Crown prince Gustav Adolf of the Seobongchong Gold Crown.</p> 	1974-1975	<p>In 1974 Pyongyang upgraded its information bureau in Stockholm to an embassy. The Swedish government established its own embassy in Pyongyang in February 1975 and was tasked with monitoring the 1974 Sweden-DPRK trade agreement, in which Pyongyang had purchased 1,000 Volvo 144 sedans.</p> 
1950-1953	<p>On the appeal of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) on June 25, 1950, Sweden sent a medical mission to the port city Busan, comprising a field hospital. At least 69 documented DPRK soldiers received treatment from the Swedish medical mission.</p> 	1995	<p>Sweden became the United States' protecting power in the DPRK in 1995, partly to provide a diplomatic "foothold". This occurred during the 1990s, when the U.S. was engaged in intense negotiations over Pyongyang's nuclear program. These negotiations later resulted in the 1994 Agreed Framework.</p> 
1953	<p>The Neutral Nations Supervisory Commission (NNSC) was one of the provisions included in the Armistice Agreement to oversee the agreement's execution and monitor the ceasefire. Sweden was selected to be one of the four nations in the Commission.</p> 	May 2001	<p>Between May 2-4, 2001, Swedish Prime Minister Göran Persson led a historic European Union (EU) delegation to Pyongyang, becoming the first Western government leader to meet with then-DPRK leader Kim Jong Il. Shortly after the visit the EU Commission decided to establish diplomatic ties with Pyongyang.</p> 
April 1973	<p>Sweden recognized the Democratic People's Republic of Korea on April 6, 1973, becoming the first Western European country to do so.</p> 	March 2018	<p>High-level diplomatic discussions took place in Stockholm, Sweden, from March 15-17, 2018, and were a crucial prelude to the historic summit between DPRK leader Kim Jong Un and U.S. President Donald Trump in June of that same year.</p> 

Before 1950

Before the 1950s, Sweden and the Korean Peninsula had shared nearly 200 years of informal contact via explorers, missionaries, and royal cultural exchanges. This includes Amanda Gardelin, a Swedish traveller who temporarily resided at King Gyeong's court in the 1880s and is said to have provided medical assistance to the royal family.¹ In 1926, the then-Swedish Crown Prince Gustaf Adolf paid a visit to Gyeongju. He took part in the excavation of a Silla era tomb and discovered a gold crown (the Seobongchong Gold Crown), which is still famously connected with Sweden-Korea relations today.² In the following year, the Korean Crown Prince (Yi Un/Prince Yeong) and Princess (Masako/Yi Bangja) paid a visit to Stockholm while on a European tour. During their journey to Stockholm, the couple was granted a royal audience with Gustaf Adolf and Crown Prince Yi Un received the Commander Grand Cross of the Order of Vasa with Collar, one of Sweden's highest honours.

1950-1953: The Korean War

After the Korean War broke out, Sweden officially denounced the DPRK's invasion by supporting United Nation Resolution 82 and 83, on June 25

and 27, 1950. On appeal from the United Nation Security Council (UNSC) on June 25, 1950, Sweden sent a medical mission to the Peninsula, comprising a field hospital with 1,124 Swedish medical and service staff. The team arrived in Busan on September 23, 1950.

It was determined that the hospital would treat patients from both the North and the South in order to make the humanitarian mission consistent with Sweden's neutrality stance, which dated back to the Napoleonic wars. At least 69 documented DPRK soldiers received treatment from the Swedish medical mission; however, some accounts indicate that the unit may have treated up to 1,200 Communist prisoners of war (including Chinese personnel). Between September 25, 1950, and December 31, 1953, the hospital treated a total of 21,500 soldiers.³

1953: The Armistice Agreement & Neutral Nations Supervisory Commission (NNSC)

The Armistice Agreement was signed on July 27, 1953, at 10:00 a.m. in the village of Panmunjom, and marked the end of hostilities. The document

was signed by military leaders from the United Nations Command (UNC), the Korean People's Army (KPA), and the Chinese People's Volunteer Army (CPVA). ROK's President at the time, Syngman Rhee, wanted to extend the conflict and therefore refused to sign the agreement.

The Neutral Nations Supervisory Commission (NNSC) was one of the provisions included in the Armistice to oversee the agreement's execution and monitor the cease-fire between the DPRK and the UNC, representing the ROK and the international forces. The Commission's main objective was, and continues to be, to monitor the ceasefire and prevent the introduction of new weapons or personnel onto the Peninsula.

The Commission comprised of four countries selected according to ideological lines of the signatory parties to the Armistice Agreement. The KPA and the CPVA selected the then-communist Czechoslovakia and Poland, whilst the UNC chose capitalist Switzerland and Sweden. These states were classified as 'neutral states' due to their non-involvement in the Korean War.⁴

Sweden accepted the NNSC mission reluctantly as the institution was domestically perceived pessimistically due to its powerlessness to prevent the two Koreas from violating the Armistice Agreement as each sides rearmed unreservedly. The most obvious example of this includes the NNSC's failure to prevent the introduction of U.S. nuclear weapons on South Korean soil in 1958. Sweden attempted to leave the NNSC in the 1950s but remained due to a lack of a suitable substitute. Nonetheless, in the 1960s and 1970s, Swedish media began to present the institution in a more positive light, with the characterization of the NNSC being framed by the Swedish legislator Bo Turesson in 1973 as a "*mission of honor which we have been entrusted in the interests of peace.*" Over time, being a member of the NNSC became a source of pride and a symbol of Sweden's peace efforts through its history of neutrality.⁵

April 6, 1973: Recognition & Diplomatic Relations

Due to the unclear situation of their sovereignty, Sweden initially opted not to establish diplomatic relations with either of the Koreas. This changed in 1957, when Sweden de facto recognized the Republic of Korea as a nation after voting in favour of its UN membership application while serving as a non-permanent member of the UNSC. In spite of a Soviet veto for UN membership, Sweden, Norway, and Denmark established diplomatic ties with Seoul in February 1959, following the establishment of a jointly operated Nordic Medical Center in Seoul.⁶

Sweden recognized the Democratic People's Republic of Korea on April 6, 1973, becoming the first Western European country to do so. It took Stockholm 16 years longer to recognize the DPRK, due in part to perceived external pressure from Washington and Seoul, which had a tough stance on third-party contacts with Pyongyang in the 1960s, as well as concerns about whether diplomatic recognition would negatively influence Sweden's neutral nation mission.⁷ However, the U.S. and South Korea's positions on third-party contacts eased in the 1970s due to a noticeable move toward Cold War détente and a changing balance of power in the UN. This, along with growing public pressure for diplomatic recognition brought on by new sentiments following the Vietnam War and a Swedish business community that perceived the DPRK as a promising emerging market, eventually prompted the Swedish government to advance diplomatic ties with Pyongyang.

1974-1975: Embassies

Leading up to the DPRK opening its embassy in Sweden, Pyongyang first established in 1970 an information bureau in Stockholm which hosted cultural exhibitions. This office operated as a forerunner to a permanent embassy and was part of a larger campaign to establish diplomatic legitimacy and economic access in Western Europe. The infor-

mation bureau operated for three years until it was upgraded to a full embassy in 1974, following the Swedish recognition and the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1973.

The Swedish government established its own embassy in Pyongyang in February 1975. Erik Cornell, a Swedish diplomat, launched the embassy and served as its first charge d'affaires from 1975 until 1977. During his diplomatic assignment, he was tasked with, among other things, monitoring the 1974 Sweden-DPRK trade agreement,⁸ in which Pyongyang had purchased mining equipment, industrial supplies, and 1,000 Volvo 144 sedans from Swedish companies. In addition, he was responsible for enabling communication and guaranteeing the safety of the Swedish employees sent to Pyongyang to instruct the locals on how to operate the new machinery. Pyongyang has never paid Sweden the roughly \$73 million, that the trade deal was worth at the time. The Swedish government currently oversees the debt, which was initially owed by businesses like Atlas Copco and Volvo and has interest of more than \$300 million, and still sends twice-yearly reminders to Pyongyang.⁹

1995: Sweden as Protecting Power and Humanitarian Assistance

Sweden became the United States' protecting power in the DPRK in 1995, partly to provide a diplomatic "foothold" amid a period of intensified engagement. This occurred during the 1990s, when the U.S. was engaged in intense negotiations over Pyongyang's nuclear program. Due to the lack of formal diplomatic relations or embassy in Pyongyang, the U.S. requested Sweden's aid in serving as a U.S. representative to help coordinate communication and handle practical issues on the ground. These negotiations later resulted in the 1994 Agreed Framework.¹⁰ Additionally, Sweden manages U.S. nationals' consular affairs in the DPRK. This includes Sweden's involvement in at least 15–20 high-profile incidents involving the detention of U.S. citizens. The Swedish mission in Pyongyang intervened and assisted in releasing U.S. citizens Kim Hak-song, Tony Kim, and Kim Dong-chul in 2018, as well as Private Travis King in 2023.¹¹ Today, Sweden also serves as a protecting power for Australia and Canada, and continues to serve as a communication bridge, relaying messages, proposals, and diplomatic efforts while reducing the

The Evolution of
SWEDEN AS PROTECTING POWER OF THE U.S.

1990s	2009	2018	2018	2023
<p>United States</p> <p>The U.S. requested Sweden's aid in serving as a U.S. representative to assist with the negotiations, later leading to the 1994 Agreed Framework.</p> <p>The U.S. government authorizes the Swedish Embassy in Pyongyang to handle consular issues for U.S. citizens.</p>	<p>Two American Journalists</p> <p>Two American journalists, Laura Ling and Euna Lee, were detained by DPRK border guards. They were detained for 140 days and sentenced to 12 years of hard labor. Sweden played an important intermediary role throughout the incident, and facilitated their release.</p>	<p>Trump-Kim Summit</p> <p>High-level diplomatic discussions took place in Stockholm, Sweden, from March 15-18, 2018, and were a crucial prelude to the historic summit between DPRK leader Kim Jong Un and U.S. President Donald Trump in June of that same year.</p>	<p>Three US Citizens</p> <p>Sweden served as the primary diplomatic architect for the release of three American detainees, Kim Hak-song, Tony Kim, and Kim Dong-chul, acting as the essential intermediary between Washington and Pyongyang.</p>	<p>Private Travis King</p> <p>Swedish diplomats facilitated the negotiations that led to Private Travis King's release from the DPRK in September 2023. In July 2023 to evade military discipline after being charged with assault in South Korea, he crossed the DMZ during an civilian tour.</p>

risk of miscommunication and misunderstanding between the DPRK and the Western world.

Sweden's humanitarian contribution began in 1995, following Pyongyang's formal request for foreign help during the "Arduous March" famine. Unlike many other countries whose aid fluctuated with geopolitical tensions, Sweden (together with Switzerland) has one of the longest and most constant records of aid delivery. Sweden historically have sent around \$3.8 million in annual humanitarian assistance to the DPRK, mostly through the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida).¹²

May 2-4, 2001: Prime Minister Göran Persson & EU Delegation in Pyongyang

Between May 2-4, 2001, Swedish Prime Minister Göran Persson led a historic European Union (EU) delegation to Pyongyang, becoming the first Western government leader to meet with then-DPRK leader Kim Jong Il. The mission was carried out under Sweden's presidency of the EU. The main purpose was to promote the DPRK-ROK reconciliation process, which had stagnated due to a shift in U.S. policy under the new Bush administration. During the visit, the two sides agreed on the DPRK halting its missile testing and to initiate a formal conversation on human rights. Shortly after the visit, on May 14, 2001, the European Commission decided to establish diplomatic ties with Pyongyang.¹³

March 2018: High-Level Talks in Stockholm ahead of the Kim-Trump Summit

High-level diplomatic discussions took place in Stockholm, Sweden, from March 15–18, 2018, and were a crucial prelude to the historic summit between DPRK leader Kim Jong Un and U.S. President Donald Trump in June of that same year. It was Ri Yong Ho, the foreign minister of the DPRK

at the time, who travelled to Stockholm to meet with his Swedish counterpart, Margot Wallström. Sweden's unique role as the "protecting power" of the U.S., its historical precedent in advocating for Western interests as well as stable engagement with Pyongyang, all contributed to the decision to hold the discussions in Stockholm.¹⁴

While the U.S. and South Korean officials were not physically present at the table, Sweden remained in close contact with Washington and Seoul throughout the visit while talks to pave the path for the proposed Trump-Kim summit were progressing. The sessions concluded with a shift in the conversation from military insecurities to "opportunities and challenges for a peaceful solution" for the Peninsula. Furthermore, these conversations established Stockholm as a preferred back channel for the later Trump-Kim summit negotiations, resulting in substantial working-level discussions in the city in January 2019 (before the Hanoi summit) and October 2019.

2026: Sweden-DPRK Relations Today

After a four-year hiatus due to DPRK's tight COVID-19 border closures, Swedish diplomats returned to Pyongyang on September 13, 2024. This made Sweden the first Western country to reopen its diplomatic mission following the pandemic, ahead of Poland and Switzerland. The Swedish diplomat, Andreas Bengtsson, currently serves as its ambassador.

Following the re-election of Donald Trump in the U.S. and the election of Lee Jae Myung as President in the ROK, a renewed willingness in Washington and Seoul to restart conversation with Pyongyang has emerged. Furthermore, the U.S. has expressed a desire for Swedish support in this regard and could once more be a window of opportunity for Sweden to facilitate discussions between Pyongyang and Washington.¹⁵ Both Trump and Kim Jung Un have voiced the potential of such meeting taking place, with some misgivings from the DPRK over discussions on denuclearization.

High-Level Talks in Stockholm ahead of Kim-Trump Summit(s)

March 15-18, 2018: Ri Yong-ho Visit Stockholm

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January 18-21, 2019: Trilateral Working-Level Talks

In order to complete the "substance" of the second U.S.-DPRK summit, the trilateral negotiations were a crucial "Track 1.5" diplomatic endeavor. **Stephen Biegun** (U.S. special representative for the DPRK) **Lee Do-hoon** (ROK Special Representative for Korean Peninsula Peace and Security Affairs) & **Choe Son-hui** (DPRK vice foreign minister) were in attendance. Sweden's Foreign Minister, **Margot Wallström**, hosted and chaired the talks. Coordination for the Hanoi Summit were discussed.

October 4-5, 2019: U.S.-DPRK Negotiations after Hanoi Summit Collapse

The October 2019 talks at Villa Elfvik Strand in Lidingö (Stockholm) were a high-stakes attempt to revive diplomacy after the collapse of the Hanoi Summit. The talks were scheduled for two days but effectively collapsed after just 8.5 hours, due to disagreements regarding sanctions relief, security guarantees and the dismantlement of DPRK's nuclear sites. The collapse of the Stockholm talks marked the end of working-level nuclear diplomacy between the Trump administration and Kim Jong Un in 2019.

Nonetheless, with Sweden officially abandoning 200 years of military non-alignment by joining the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in March 2024, some researchers fear that this will cause friction with Pyongyang and may hinder Sweden's ability to facilitate such talks in the future.¹⁶ However, seemingly the status quo of engagement persists. As the DPRK political leadership have unofficially voiced that Sweden in their perspective was a de facto member of NATO due to its significant cooperation with the member states even prior to its accession in 2024, in their eyes Sweden's position remains the same.

As Pyongyang has consistently refused to receive supplies in 2024 and 2025, Swedish humanitarian aid is currently on hold. Nonetheless, with Swedish diplomats back at the embassy in Pyongyang, humanitarian needs are once again being more closely monitored, allowing the international community to be better prepared to act and send aid, if such a request from the DPRK leadership should be voiced in the future.

Conclusion

Sweden has established itself as a reliable partner of the DPRK via ongoing engagement and constructive communication. Sweden's commitment has benefited other nations, particularly the U.S., by providing a key "window" into one of the world's most isolated countries. Furthermore, Sweden as the protecting power of the U.S. has facilitated high-level dialogues between Washington and Pyongyang, as well as ensured the release of several American citizens.

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