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EXPERTS TAKE

Contemporary Issues on the Korean Peninsula: A Military and Defense Perspective

An Interview with
MAJ GEN (RET) MATS ENGMAN

Zahra Nayabi and Julia Rösgrén

On the reopening of the Institute for Security & Development Policy's (ISDP) Stockholm Korea Center, Zahra Nayabi and Julia Rösgrén sat down for an interview with the new Head of Center and Distinguished Military Fellow, Maj Gen (ret) Mats Engman, to discuss his experience as the former Head of the Swedish delegation to the Neutral Nations Supervisory Commission (NNSC) to gather an insight on his views and experiences on contemporary issues on the Korean Peninsula.

Mats Engman has more than forty years of active military service. During his time in the military, he was assigned as the Head of the Swedish Delegation to the NNSC in South Korea (2015-2017). He was further involved as the UN military observer in the Middle East and has served as the Defense attaché to the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland for up to three years. His focus lies in security policy, military strategy, and crisis management. He graduated from the Swedish Command and Staff College and the Geneva Centre for Security Policy



and has attended the US International Intelligence Fellows program at Bolling AFB, the US Senior International Defense Management Course in Monterey and the United Nations Senior Mission Leaders Course in Amman, Jordan.

Julia Rösgrén: Why did you apply and accept the role of Head of the Swedish delegation to the NNSC?

Mats Engman: The answer is simple: throughout my career, I have been on several international appointments and have always enjoyed working in other countries, cultures, and international organizations. When the opportunity to apply was presented, I realized this was both a very interesting mission and probably my last opportunity to do another overseas mission. Being interested in strategic developments in general and having the opportunity to be deployed to this part of the world where the strategic dynamic is on the rise was a combination that made the decision easy.

Another important factor was that moving to South Korea would enable me to bring my wife so we could do this as a joint endeavor. We have been together on my four previous international assignments: once in Geneva and in London respectively, and twice in the Middle East. We have always enjoyed living and working in an international environment, and Anita has been a great supporter in all missions.

Zahra Nayabi: How will Sweden officially joining NATO affect their role as a representative nation for the Neutral Nations Supervisory Commission (NNSC) in the Korean Peninsula? Some may argue that by joining NATO, Sweden has lost its century-long policy of neutrality. What is your take on this discussion and how do you see Sweden's role in the NNSC continue?

Engman: Back in 1953, it was not about Sweden being a NATO ally or not. If I'm not mistaken, when Poland and Czechoslovakia became members of the Warsaw Pact in 1955, there was no requirement for them to abandon their membership in NNSC. Poland did not have to leave the NNSC when they joined Nato in 1999, and logically the same policy should now apply to Sweden. The four nations initially selected to form the NNSC were chosen because of not having provided combat troops in the Korean War, and that fact still remains, or as stated in Paragraph 37 of the Korean Armistice Agreement: "The term 'neutral nations' as herein used is defined as those nations whose combatant forces have not participated in the hostilities in Korea."

To my understanding, there is a very strong bi-partisan political support in Sweden for our continued engagement on the Korean Peninsula and the NNSC. I do not see any change because of our NATO membership, but there may be opportunities where certain nations may use the fact that Sweden is now a member of NATO in attempts to, perhaps, question the Commission and/or Sweden's role in the Commission. From a formal point of view, however, it will not change anything.

Rösgrén: Does the NNSC see opportunities to expand?

Engman: In the Korean Armistice Agreement, there is a provision (Paragraph 61) that if all the signatories agree, changes and amendments to the agreement can be made. In theory, this at least opens the possibility that the signatories can propose

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changes to the Agreement including proposing new nations for the NNSC. When Czechoslovakia split it was proposed that the Czech Republic should be the successor state to Czechoslovakia, but North Korea, as I understand, did not accept this. Under the current geopolitical rivalry, any change to the composition of the NNSC is not likely to happen. Changes to the Agreement may happen only under different geopolitical conditions or as a consequence of a peace declaration or a peace agreement. However, this is all up to the signatories: the United Nations Command (UNC), the Korean People's Army (KPA), and the Chinese People's Volunteers (CPV).

Nayabi: When it comes to the NNSC, North Korea ceased to recognize the commission in 1995, which eventually resulted in the constant violation of the Armistice Agreement by all parties. What do you think should have been done to improve the commission, and how can a commission successfully navigate and maintain compliance when one party is unwilling to cooperate?

Engman: It is a significant restriction on any commission if one of the signatories sever the relationship with that organization. The second-best way to handle such a situation, I believe, is what the NNSC did and has been trying to do with its partners on the southern side ever since the situation changed in the mid-1990s; trying to maintain its impartiality and its tasks and obligations under the Armistice Agreement; but also trying to – within the framework or spirit of the Armistice Agreement – develop additional tasks that are deemed to be meaningful for transparency, stability and, eventually, peace on the peninsula.

Until today, the formal reporting that the NNSC does in their weekly meetings are submitted to the KPA. The tragic thing is that the KPA do not empty the mailbox. Once the KPA's mailbox is full, the NNSC takes out the documents and archives the copies.

At the time of 1995, it would have been very difficult to come up with an “alternative plan” for maintaining a presence on the northern side, because the Czechoslovakian delegation broke up after the nation broke up, and as North Korea did not recognize the Czech Republic as a successor state, they had to leave for formal reasons, since they no longer had legal grounds to be there. It was different for the Polish delegation, because they still had (and have) legal grounds to be present in North Korea, since North Korea did not formally leave the Armistice Agreement as such. What North Korea did instead was to, allegedly, make life difficult for the Polish delegates that they decided to leave.

You can make parallels between the Military Armistice Commission in the Middle East, where there initially were five Military Armistice Commissions set up between Israel and the neighboring countries. If one of the countries decides to not show up in the Military Armistice Commissions meeting, there is not much you can do. You can continue having the meetings, prepare the minutes, and archive the minutes, and report to higher authorities, but you cannot fulfill your missions. It is very difficult. You need to either come up with an incentive for a nation to re-commit to the obligations or apply political pressure to achieve the same result.

Rösgren: North Korea recently denounced unification. What possible implications do you think this may have?

Engman: I can see two different scenarios ahead of me. One scenario is a slightly more positive scenario, and the other is a more negative one. The negative scenario is an increase in the belief that North Korea is under siege, surrounded by aggressive neighbors – or at least one aggressive neighbor – which would then reinforce the argument that they need to spend more on military capability development, nuclear development, and missile capability. This would

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also make the arguments for continued repression on anything that is linked to engagement with South Korea, and to limit any kind of influence of South Korean soft power and information, since South Korea is now branded as the enemy and not as a people with a joint history with North Korea.

The more positive, but maybe too idealistic, interpretation is that there would be a realization in North Korea – and maybe to a degree in South Korea – that unification is never going to happen because these countries have developed very differently and are now two distinct different countries. What would be the second-best option if unification is not possible or likely? Would it not be possible, over time, to develop normal, neighborly relations in which you diplomatically recognize that there is a North Korea and a South Korea that can deal with each other as neighboring countries?

Initially, of course, there will be a lot of suspicions and hard rhetoric, but maybe over time the relations may even become “manageable.” Like what we did when Sweden and Norway separated back in 1905. We were one country, and then suddenly we were two countries, but we managed to do that separation without a war. The same with East Germany and West Germany. At the end of the day, an opportunity may be developed over time to establish formal recognition as two independent and sovereign countries with two different political systems.

Rösgren: What do you think is the largest obstacle for a peaceful establishment of North and South

Korea as two separate countries?

Engman: I think it is about perceptions. The perception of unification is extremely strong, especially in the older generation in South Korea. The concept and perception of unification are for many old South Koreans that “we are one people, we have a common history, we were one nation back in the 1940s”. I suppose it is the same in North Korea; it is only that I have not spoken to them. The perception among people is the most challenging thing to overcome, I think.

However, looking at the facts and how these two nations have developed since the 1940s, you have one highly technologically developed nation with a democratic system that has stood the test of time, and you have one authoritarian nation built on a socialist system with very few liberties for ordinary citizens and a very backward economy. Many in the younger generation in South Korea are coming to realize the growing differences between the countries, and therefore the perception is changing, albeit very slowly. Additionally, however, this topic also has a constitutional reality, because, as I understand, when you take the presidential oath in South Korea, it covers the entire Peninsula and not just South Korea. Although you could have a general agreement and a change in public perceptions, the process of changing a constitution is filled with uncertainties and takes a long time.

Nayabi: Since North Korea and Russia have seemingly strengthened their bilateral ties following the invasion of Ukraine and the September 2023

summit, do you see a chance of North Korea continuing their diplomatic ties with European nations or the US?

Engman: North Korea wants to have multiple options or avenues for their diplomatic engagement; therefore, I think there is a strong national interest for North Korea to maintain most of their European ties. The improved relationship between North Korea and Russia does not mean that the relationship with the Western European nations has become less significant or less important to North Korea. I think they would find it troublesome if European nations would take the initiative not to engage. Therefore, it is in their national interest to maintain ties.

Rösgren: There is a lot of buzz in the media regarding the upcoming U.S. presidential election in November. How do you see the presidential election results affect the ROK-US alliance and North Korea relations?

Engman: Starting with the ROK-US alliance, I think the Alliance would change if Mr. Trump would win the presidential election. With him in the Oval Office, the alliance may be in for a rocky ride. I am rather confident that Mr. Trump will request a change in the Special Measures Agreement and ask that ROK pays substantially more for the U.S. military presence in the country. Therefore, the ongoing talks to finalize the SMA before the end

of this year will be important, especially for South Korea.

I do not think that Mr. Trump will denounce the ROK-US alliance, but depending on his statements and actions, he could pose a potential challenge to the credibility of the alliance. However, I am not sure how far he would go, because the alliance today is not just an alliance for the inter-Korean contingencies; I think there is a clear realization, especially in Seoul – and always has been in Washington – that this alliance is equally important for contingencies in other directions such as the South China Sea, Taiwan Strait, and China in general. Therefore, I think the alliance will not be suffering from any major setbacks, but there will be changes.

I think when it comes to North Korea – which I have said a couple of times before when talking about U.S. policy toward North Korea – we should accept that when Mr. Trump was president, he changed the calculus in Pyongyang in such a way that they could not rule out a preemptive military strike. He was unpredictable enough that even North Korea concluded that there was a need to reengage or act to reduce the risk of a preemptive military strike. As you probably recall, this was Mr. Trump’s “Bloody Nose” Strategy.

However, when it comes to the possibility of a third summit between Kim Jong Un and Trump, the personal humiliation that Kim Jung Un suffered in

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the Hanoi summit means that it will take time for him to develop the trust needed for diplomatic re-engagements. North Korea will therefore be more cautious, and it will take a lot of work before Kim Jung Un agrees to another summit. In addition, North Korea's new relationship with Russia is making Kim Jung Un less dependent on inter-Korean rapprochement.

Nayabi: The Northern Limit Line (NLL) is an increasingly volatile border area due to North Korea claiming the NLL to have been illegally drawn. Can you elaborate on the reasons behind the claims and the ROK-US counterargument to them?

Engman: To a degree, I think I can, since it seems to be a valid statement that the NLL was drawn as a line without previous negotiations and agreements with North Korea. The UNC drew the line in August 1953 after the signing of the Armistice Agreement in an attempt to regulate naval traffic between the Northwest Island (under UNC control) and the North Korean coast. As I understand, it was to limit the ROK and the U.S. naval vessels from wandering too far north. However, with time, it came to be recognized by South Korea as a legitimate territorial border, but with questionable legal basis in international law. During my two years of service, there were many incidents when North Korean vessels came south of the line, and many times, these vessels were intercepted by South Korean naval vessel and, on several occasions, warning shots were fired to push them north of the line.

As South Korea considers the NLL as a

territorial boundary, using warning shots to “protect” its border is logical, but a similar argument can be made of North Korean actions, as they do not recognize the NLL as a national border and it has not, to my knowledge, been internationally or legally recognized.

Something similar went on in the Baltic Sea during the Cold War. For instance, on several occasions, we had Soviet aircraft close to, or navigating toward Swedish airspace, and we scrambled fighters to intercept the Soviet aircraft and try to push them out. In situations of high political and military tension, like on the Korean Peninsula, these types of border disputes and differing understandings of the legality of a certain delineation create instabilities, including warning shots being fired. This highlights the importance of reaching mutual agreements between the parties regarding border delineations, and having these agreements transferred to detailed markings on the ground, at sea, and in airspace to avoid misunderstandings and differing interpretations.

Ceasefire lines drawn on a map during negotiations can be interpreted differently when established on the ground. Using one common set of maps or charts and having a mechanism to manage disagreements is important. In the demilitarized zone (DMZ) on the Korean Peninsula, the original markers have been eroded by time and shielded by vegetation, making it difficult for individual soldiers to know exactly where the borderline is. Ensuring you always have accurate and agreed maps and charts are instrumental in all types of armistice and

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The disagreement over the demarcation on the Korean Peninsula is not an isolated issue. For example, in the case of demarcation lines separating Israel and Syria, on the Golan heights, even a minor difference in interpretations can lead to disputes, as crossing that threshold signifies trespassing according to one side but not the other. Thus, a negotiated settlement and agreement regarding the exact location of a line would be highly beneficial in mitigating tensions in such areas.

Rösgren: The maritime border area has become a source of political strife due to the low-level skirmishes and military drills. With the current state of the Korean Peninsula, which potential measures can be taken to reduce the tensions?

Engman: There are several measures that can be taken, but currently, the difficulty is that we do not have any direct line of communications with the KPA in North Korea. However, some of the potential measures are to establish a naval hotline system between the two naval commands that are responsible for the area. The aim is to have a direct naval hotline that one could use for any kind of incident and, of course, for information sharing.

Secondly, you could potentially make an agreement establishing a type of “grey zone”, where both parties agree to disagree about the legal status but could agree upon certain navigational procedures to reduce the risks of misunderstanding. Such an agreement would then have nothing to do with any kind of follow-up legal arrangements. You could also introduce a naval code of conduct where both parties agree, without making any kind of grey zone agreement, to basically notify their movements in the disputed area. There are several potential actions that could reduce the tensions and the risk of incidence, but they all require the parties to engage

in dialogue, which is currently lacking in the case of North and South Korea.

Nayabi: While U.S. officials discourage any acts of aggression between the parties and call for a peaceful negotiation, some may argue that their presence in the military drills along the NLL further provokes North Korea. What is your opinion on this line of thought?

Engman: There is a consistent policy from North Korea to brand any exercise between ROK-US forces as offensive, aggressive, preemptive, and a preparation for war. I do not think that it is possible to change the North Korean narrative in how they view the nature of the alliance and its exercises, but it may be possible to, over time, change the North Korean reactions and provocations with a more dedicated and strategic communication about the exercise and a balanced awareness when you choose the location and time for exercises. Inviting third parties to observe parts of an exercise, and even some additional transparency on the exercise scenario, could potentially reduce tensions around exercises.

At the end of the day, everybody (including the KPA) knows that one of the things that military forces do is to exercise. That is part of our daily activity; we train and exercise. It is needed to keep the troops prepared for various potential scenarios and train them to use the equipment effectively. I do not think there is any merit in asking for no exercise, and I do not believe that the ROK-US alliance should accept that argument because they need to exercise to be a credible deterrent and to be ready for defensive actions if something happens. However, what you can do is communicate about why you exercise and give a little bit of information on the exercise objective and scenarios. Of course, there are limits to what you can make public because of national security and classification.