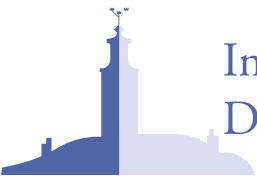


THE NEXT GENERATION

The Future of Korean Research from a Nordic Perspective

Edited by
Josephine Ørgaard Rasmussen

March 2025



Institute for Security &
Development Policy

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www.isdp.eu

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Printed in Lithuania

ISBN: 978-91-88551-63-4

Distributed in Europe by:

Institute for Security and Development Policy

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Introduction

The Nordic countries are long-standing partners to South Korea, engaging in dialogue and collaborating on regional and global concerns since 1959. Despite a long history of state-level cooperation, the Nordic public's knowledge of Korean affairs remains comparatively low when compared to other regional powers in East Asia, particularly China and Japan. However, during the last decade, there has been a noticeable increase in societal interest in South Korea throughout the Nordic region. Nonetheless, the present structures for information and knowledge exchanges on Korean issues within the Nordic region are insufficient and appear obsolete in dealing with 21st-century challenges, ranging from increasing awareness of regional security interdependence and shared values to promoting common business opportunities and cultural exchanges. To this end, the ISDP Korea Center, conducts the Nordic-Korea Next Generation Policy Expert Program with generous support from the Korea Foundation. The Program aims to strengthen cooperative relationships between South Korea and the Nordic region, as well as to serve as an energizing incubator for the next generation of Korean policy experts, by providing young scholars with a forum to discuss their research with senior Nordic and South Korean colleagues, as well as practical hands-on experience with policy-related work.

ISDP's Korea Center had the pleasure of welcoming five young professionals from different Nordic nations with diverse professional backgrounds. During the Next Generation training program, the participants attended a three-day training session in Stockholm, where they received lectures from leading academics and policy analysts from the Nordics, Europe and South Korea. Following the three-day training session, each participant was allocated a senior mentor with relevant experience in the participant's field of research. The participants, with the support of their respective mentors, submitted policy papers reflecting their personal perspectives on the future of South Korean and/or North Korean cooperation with the Nordics and Western organizations such

as the EU and NATO across numerous policy sectors, as well as concrete policy recommendations. This booklet is thus a compilation of the participants' research and the culmination of the Next Generation training Program.

Incentives for ROK-NATO Strategic Alignment: A Post-Martial Law Outlook

By Frida Lampinen

Introduction

In June 2022, the president of the Republic of Korea (ROK or South Korea) for the first time attended a North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) summit, marking a notable elevation of ROK-NATO relations.¹ South Korea and NATO first established contact in the early 2000s, and the ROK became a global partner state to the organization in 2012. Since Yoon Suk-yeol of the conservative People Power Party (PPP) won the South Korean presidency in 2022, ROK-NATO cooperation has expanded significantly. Alongside increased engagement as part of the Indo-Pacific Four (IP4) working group, the Yoon administration opened a ROK diplomatic mission to NATO HQ in 2022 and adopted a bilateral Individually Tailored Partnership Programme in 2023.²

NATO's outreach to Indo-Pacific partners follows from its 2022 Strategic Concept, which recognizes that developments beyond the Euro-Atlantic theatre – in particular, those owing to Chinese policy actions– increasingly impact the alliance's interests.³ South Korea emerges as an attractive regional counterpart for several reasons, including its defence alliance with the United States, strong economy and military, and shared interest in preserving peace. On South Korea's part, observers have accredited the interest in NATO to Yoon's personal leadership and policy goals, which are similar to the positions of the U.S. and other NATO members.⁴ However, Yoon's declaration of martial law on December 3, 2024, has plunged the country into a governance crisis, raising questions about the robustness of South Korea's foreign relations.⁵ In light of the current political crisis,* this paper

* At the time of writing in February 2025, the impeachment trial is ongoing. Although Yoon is indicted for insurrection, he remains in office with suspended presidential powers, pending the Constitutional Court's decision.

explores three incentives for the ROK government to sustain its engagement with NATO in a post-martial law landscape.

Seoul's Evolving Security Logic

Since the Korean War, ROK security thinking has centred on one single issue— the North Korean threat— for understandable reasons. As a Euro-Atlantic defence alliance, NATO has had limited practical relevance for Korean security. However, the emergence of new transnational threats over the past two decades has pushed South Korea's security and foreign policy agenda to expand beyond the peninsula to include broader geo-economics and non-traditional military contingencies. The strategic rivalry between Washington and Beijing will continue to demand much attention in Seoul regardless of which political party holds power post-crisis.

With Trump's return to the White House, U.S.-China relations, especially in the trade domain, stand to become even more confrontational. Striking the balance between economic pragmatism— China is an extremely significant trade partner to South Korea— and supporting the U.S.' de-risking initiatives to the extent expected in Washington is a delicate task. At the same time, North Korea's engagement in Russia's war against Ukraine threatens to entangle the peninsula in conflict. South Korea's traditionally one-dimensional security logic has translated into a small interest in multilateral security fora and in building domestic capabilities for long-term strategic assessments.⁶ As a result, the ROK today possesses limited expertise to deal with novel threats and strategic dilemmas; similarly, the Korean public is inexperienced in thinking about security issues in interconnected terms, translating into lower grassroots support for global defence initiatives.⁷

Under this broadened scope, strategic alignment with NATO gains renewed relevance for a forthcoming administration. The institutionalized relations and Seoul's close ties to the U.S. renders sustained alignment with NATO a relatively accessible and politically uncontentious shortcut into an experienced security community that could offer new ideas. Although South Korea's foreign policy approaches tend to change with each administration, the government will continuously need to navigate complex transnational

issues. While there is a general informal consensus on the benefits of NATO alignment, the main opposition, the progressive Democratic Party (DP), has not officially declared its support.⁸ A new government headed by a progressive president would, based on historical precedent, pay less attention to multilateral security ties and more attention to the North Korean issue. Given the internationalization of the North Korean threat following the troop deployment to Russia, however, the window into the European security community created by South Korea's presence at NATO HQ should be valuable to any government.

Rebuilding Trust

Second, sustained cooperation with NATO presents an avenue for South Korea to rebuild its credibility as a partner in the foreign policy arena. Adding onto Yoon's despotic attempt to close the National Assembly and to detain political opponents under martial law, evidence suggests he may have plotted to provoke a military confrontation with North Korea to justify seizing stronger political control.⁹ Such underhand tactics are directly contrary to the principles of freedom, peace and prosperity that underpin South Korea's diplomatic strategy.¹⁰ If the president indeed planned to use military action and intended to keep relevant parties unknowing of it (the US Forces Korea reportedly did not receive prior notice of the martial law declaration), South Korea's reliability as a security partner is severely tarnished.¹¹ If misgivings about Seoul's trustworthiness to fulfil agreed-upon security obligations pushes the White House to recalibrate its approach to the U.S.-ROK alliance, the alliance's deterrent effect may weaken, at which point antagonistic opportunists could advance a more assertive position. An unreliable reputation may further alienate other existing and potential partners in economic and diplomatic affairs.

The restoration of credibility in the global arena thus emerges as a key priority for a prospective president. To this end, expanding collaborations with liberal organizations, including NATO, the UN, and the EU could help rebuild Seoul's democratic credentials. Alongside NATO's core missions of collective defence and crisis management, the third mission of cooperative security aims to uphold international stability by sharing knowledge and

coordinating responses with relevant non-members.¹² Yoon's attention to European security issues in issuing sanctions on Russia, backfilling Euro-Atlantic ammunition stocks, and providing humanitarian assistance to Ukraine demonstrates solidarity against revisionism. While sustaining support in Europe is important, stepping up contributions towards preserving stability in the Indo-Pacific, for example by coordinating policy responses with the U.S., will be critical to reaffirm South Korea's role in the regional security architecture. For best effect, the same trust building approach should orientate Seoul's decisions in other dilemmas, such as the do or don't of developing domestic nuclear weapons.

Defence Business Partnerships

Third, the NATO partnership facilitates commercial opportunities on the European defence market. South Korea already has a foot in the door, having delivered a large procurement order to Poland in 2022.¹³ Boosting defence exports is a well-advertised goal for the Yoon administration, but has a broader bipartisan appeal: invigorating South Korea's industrial base and providing a diversified source of revenue at a time when Chinese demand for foreign high-tech goods is dwindling.¹⁴ Additionally, arms procurement projects are major economic undertakings that usually last for years, meaning they provide opportunities for building bilateral rapport—which could create new openings for the ROK to expand its security partnerships through military-to-military exchanges, joint exercises, and defence industrial co-production with Euro-Atlantic partners.

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations – A Post-Crisis Outlook

Overall, the development of ROK-NATO ties beyond the current political crisis appears promising. It could function as a springboard for Seoul's interests in exchanging knowledge and best practices on new threats, reaffirming its role in international relations, and boosting its defence industrial exports. Yet, the path ahead is certainly not free of challenges. The ongoing turmoil in the aftermath of the martial law imposition has displayed the great extent of domestic polarization. Both the governing PPP and the oppositional DP have capitalized on the crisis to score political points to advance their shared

appetite for presidential power.¹⁵ At the same time, intra-party conflicts raise the bar for a new administration to hit the ground running in a clear policy direction.

A central ally to the U.S. and a strong military actor in the Indo-Pacific region, South Korea's political stabilization is critical to maintaining stability in this tense geopolitical region. The key point – regardless of the political leaning of a prospective presidential successor – is for the administration to earn the restored trust of the South Korean public and of the international community. Once the situation has stabilized, however, there are reasons for NATO engagement to be on the government's agenda—particularly so if President Trump withdraws support for the US-ROK alliance or NATO. NATO, too, will be glad for the reaffirmed support of a resilient democracy in times of mounting geopolitical tensions.

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Strategically Autonomous Together: The EU-ROK as Indo-Pacific Security Partners

By Jacob Ranglin Grissler

Introduction

In November 2024, the EU concluded two security and defense partnerships with South Korea (ROK) and Japan. After having concluded strategic, free trade, green, and digital partnerships, this was a step towards a larger role by the EU in the security of the Indo-Pacific, and vice versa. EU-ROK defense cooperation so far mostly centers on the ROK's cooperation with NATO, but the ROK-NATO cooperation is nascent, and its cooperation with the EU is even more so. "Security and defense" had been one of the EU's priority areas for its Indo-Pacific strategy since its inception in 2021,¹ but other areas had taken precedence. Similarly, Seoul was late in embracing the Indo-Pacific concept due to its "strategic ambiguity" of hedging between China, its greatest trade partner, and the U.S., its greatest security partner. As the EU is seeking to ensure strategic autonomy, however, the newfound military ties between the two risk being undermined. But there are some factors that make the ROK compatible with the EU's strategic autonomy and security outlook on the Indo-Pacific, which targets the Eurasian continent rather than China.

The China Question

The "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" strategies of the U.S. and Japan – two major promoters of the strategic Indo-Pacific concept – were introduced to counter China's growing influence in the region. Especially the U.S. strategies under both the Donald Trump and Joe Biden administrations are blatantly clear in pointing out China as a strategic rival. Japan also toughened its language on China in its 2022 National Security Strategy, stating that China presents "an unprecedented and the greatest strategic challenge in ensuring the peace and security of Japan."²

But the EU and the ROK are less clear. The ROK's Indo-Pacific strategy is surprisingly soft on China, despite President Yoon's pre-election arguments for "strategic clarity" that prioritizes the U.S. security alliance.³ The first out of three principles for cooperation in the strategy is "inclusiveness", where it is stated that it "neither targets nor excludes any particular country." Indeed, the language on China is that of "a key partner for achieving prosperity and peace in the Indo-Pacific region."⁴ Even in the ROK's trilateral 2022 Phnom Penh statement with the U.S. and Japan on "peace and stability across the Taiwan strait" and opposing "any unilateral attempts to change the status quo in waters of the Indo-Pacific," China is not mentioned once.⁵ A Democratic Party takeover would only mean even more accommodation to China.

Meanwhile, the EU in their 2021 joint communication do mention China's military build-up, but only in passing, as part of a region-wide development.⁶ Rather than a strategic rival, China is usually described as a "systemic rival" due to their differences on values such as democracy and human rights and is usually accompanied by the less antagonistic phrasing of "partner for cooperation" and "economic competitor". China is not described as a military threat.⁷ Moreover, only a handful of EU member states have a military presence in the Indo-Pacific, e.g. France, Germany, and Italy; even the ROK is wary of joint naval drills in the South China Sea.⁸ Rather, security concerns lie on the Eurasian continent.

The DPRK and Russia as Common Security Threats

Conversely, though the two defense pacts that the EU concluded with the ROK and Japan are mostly the same, the most striking difference is that the ROK version mentions Russia and the DPRK as they recognize "Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea's (DPRK) nuclear and missile programs" as "threats to global peace and security."⁹ Despite the outward-looking "Global Pivotal State" ambitions, the ROK Indo-Pacific strategy has still been criticized for retaining its focus on the DPRK threat.¹⁰ Moreover, contrary to the language on China, the Phnom Penh statement does not shy away from wording like "strongly condemning" the DPRK's missile launches or "Russia's unprovoked and brutal war of aggression against Ukraine."¹¹

The DPRK and Russia certainly pose an immediate security threat to both the EU and the ROK. The DPRK and Russia ratified a mutual defense treaty in November 2024¹² and exchanged several military favors, such as DPRK troops and artillery shells to Russia, and for the DPRK, Russian anti-air missiles and military technology for its satellite programs.¹³ While the EU and the ROK see China foremost as a valuable trade partner, they both describe Russia and the DPRK as security threats. Although a DP takeover in the ROK will make this less explicit and the language more tempered, the security concerns will remain.

Diversified Partners Among Fragile Alliances

Besides common threat perceptions, the commitment of both the EU and the ROK's greatest security ally, the U.S., is uncertain. Donald Trump has made this clear on numerous occasions, as he has threatened to withdraw defense support for both NATO and the ROK if they do not increase their own military expenditures. Also, most South Koreans opposed the consolidation with Japan, which makes the future of the U.S. trilateral somewhat uncertain.

President Yoon became the first Korean president to attend a NATO summit in 2022, as he joined the other AP4 countries of Japan, Australia, and New Zealand. By doing so, the ROK seeks even closer ties to the U.S. but also to maximize its security network with European and other partners.¹⁴

Since Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, the EU has developed its own security strategy. In March 2022, the EU declared in its Versailles Declaration that it would "take more responsibility for its own security". The next month, it laid out its Strategic Compass to strengthen its security and defense policy by 2030. As "working with partners" is one of the goals, closer cooperation with the ROK should be facilitated. However, the strategy also set out to "reinforce defence industrial capabilities," which might pose a problem for the ROK.¹⁵

While the 2024 EU-ROK security and defense partnership included a broad range of areas of cooperation, such as maritime, cyber, and space security,

there was no mention of weapon deals, despite the ROK having become a major weapon provider for Poland and other Eastern European EU member states – including Ukraine, indirectly.¹⁶ In March 2024, the EU stated its target to increase domestic weapons production from 20% to 60% by 2035.¹⁷ French President Emmanuel Macron subsequently questioned the EU's dependence on outside arms exporters, such as the ROK and the U.S.¹⁸ This might shut the door on the ROK's new-found weapons export market, and there were already signs last year that the ROK was withdrawing its material support for Ukraine in anticipation of the Trump 2.0 presidency.¹⁹

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

Cooperation with the ROK is no obstacle to the EU's strategic autonomy. Rather, their common perceptions of security in the Indo-Pacific and the EU's need for a broader security network make the ROK an ideal Indo-Pacific security partner. The ROK is comprehensively supporting Ukraine, and it will likely continue doing so for the foreseeable future. Therefore, the EU should take a long-term approach to foster this relation in order to bolster their strategic autonomy together by:

- Agreeing on a common stance on Russia, the DPRK, and China. Then, leverage this stance within the NATO-AP4 and other international security fora.
- Finding a complementary role for the ROK to the EU's strategic autonomy, not least regarding weapons procurement.
- Exploring common ways to manage their relations with China, e.g. by increasing supply chain resilience.

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Charting a Path in the Arctic: South Korea-Nordic Cooperation in a New Geopolitical Era

By Nima Khorrami

Introduction

The geopolitics of the Arctic region is increasingly defined¹ by a fast intensifying, and highly unpredictable, interplay of global power dynamics, economic interests, and environmentally-induced transformations. As such, Arctic today has evolved into a key theatre where the interconnected challenges of strategic competition, economic security, and multipolarity converge. These unfolding trends underscore a reconfiguration of partnerships in the Arctic and raise an interesting, albeit difficult, question about the role of non Arctic states at a time when regional governance faces unprecedented strain and its economic outlook undergoes transformative changes. For South Korea, developing a nuanced understanding of this complex and rapidly changing landscape constitutes a critical first step towards formulating a forward-looking Arctic strategy; one that reflects the contemporary strategic realities of the Arctic region, builds on the strength of Seoul's Arctic relevant resources, and aligns with its broader geopolitical and economic objectives. In this effort, strengthening cooperation with the Nordic states presents a largely untapped yet highly valuable opportunity driven in no small part by the two sides' shared democratic values, aligned interests, and complementary capabilities in the region.

South Korea's Arctic Strategy

While acknowledging its lack of sovereignty in the Arctic and thus leaving out defence and security issues, South Korea's recent Arctic strategy highlights its bold ambition to capitalize on economic prospects and position itself as a significant influencer in the region's future development.² A key focus is leveraging the Northern Sea Route (NSR) to cut shipping

costs between East Asia and Europe. South Korea also sees its shipbuilding expertise—particularly in LNG and shuttle tankers—as a strategic asset. Collaborations with Russian firms like Samsung Heavy Industries³ and Daewoo⁴ highlight the benefits of combining South Korean manufacturing with Russian engineering. Additionally, Seoul views scientific research and technological innovation as tools for regional influence and engages in Arctic governance through multilateral platforms like the Arctic Council and the IMO, as well as hosting key conferences, including the first three on the Central Arctic Ocean Fisheries Agreement (CAOFA).

Complementing Capabilities: Nordics as Viable Partners

As South Korea's traditional partnership in the Arctic with Russia become increasingly strained, there is an urgent need to pivot toward diversifying its alliances. To this end, building new partnerships with both the Arctic and non-Arctic actors is critical for maintaining, and expanding, its regional presence. In particular, collaboration with Japan, which shares Seoul's preference against being grouped into an Asian bloc and pursues similar interests in Arctic governance and infrastructure,⁵ could provide South Korea with a viable option to strengthen its voice, enhance its negotiating power, assert greater influence in multilateral forums, and contribute to regional governance structures.

The logical next step for Seoul is to expedite closer cooperation with Nordic states in the Arctic. These nations' roles in regional governance coupled with their technological expertise and commitment to sustainable development make them natural partners for Seoul in its quest for a greater Arctic presence. Such partnerships would not just complement South Korea's Arctic strategy but also provide a stable foundation for navigating evolving geopolitical landscape both inside and outside the Arctic. These countries similar political outlook as trade-reliant liberal democracies with strong technological and innovation capabilities boost the potential for mutually beneficial collaboration across a wide range of sectors including shipping, space, communication, and mining.

One compelling rationale for South Korea-Nordic cooperation lies in their

common, yet not identical, threat perceptions regarding Russia and China. South Korea's robust Defence Technological and Industrial Base and its leadership in dual-use technologies also align well with Nordic countries' Arctic defence strategies. For instance, Sweden's focus⁶ on space-based Arctic security, exemplified by the expansion⁷ of the Esrange Space Center, complements South Korea's expertise⁸ in AI, autonomous systems, and smart technologies. By partnering on Arctic surveillance, search-and-rescue capabilities, and communication networks, both sides can expand their contributions to the Arctic Council's PAME working group⁹ and further enhance regional security and resilience against potential adversaries. Moreover, South Korea's burgeoning defence export industry, especially with regard to autonomous vehicles, is well-positioned to address Nordic states' defence procurement needs. Joint R&D initiatives, particularly in Arctic-specific technologies, could further deepen ties while ensuring interoperability with NATO standards.

The maritime domain presents yet another critical avenue for cooperation. South Korea and the Nordic countries share a commitment to sustainable shipping; a necessity in the fragile Arctic environment. The Nordic states, with their expertise in green technology, and South Korea, a global leader in shipbuilding, including ice breakers, and smart port systems,¹⁰ are well-equipped to develop ice-capable, green and autonomous maritime solutions. Collaborative efforts could include AI-powered navigation systems to map and predict ice sheet movements and development of smart ports and eco-friendly shipping technologies. Similarly, the decarbonization of heavy industries, particularly steel production where Sweden is a leading nation, provides an opportunity for South Korea and Nordic countries to collaborate on green mining and steel production, in an effort to responsibly utilize Arctic's mineral resources as part of their wider push for attaining mineral security.

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

South Korea's ability to execute its Arctic, and indeed broader foreign policy objectives, is conditioned by a complex interplay of domestic, regional, and international factors. Moscow's growing partnership

with North Korea and the looming prospect of North Korea gaining advanced Russian military technology have heightened tensions on the Korean Peninsula and could eventually trigger an arms race; a prospect that would considerably strain South Korea's resources and complicate its Arctic ambitions. Domestically, political uncertainty revolving around the outcome of ongoing impeachment proceedings risks diverting focus from foreign policy objectives and weakening the coherence of diplomatic efforts. Last but not least, the dysfunctionality of the Arctic Council leaves South Korea reliant on alternative mechanisms like bilateral agreements, regional partnerships, or multilateral organizations to secure its Arctic interests. To effectively navigate these challenges, South Korea should pursue an Arctic strategy in close cooperation with the Nordic states along two key paths.

Strengthening NORDEFECO-South Korea ties

Prioritize deepening partnership with NORDEFECO by engaging in structured initiatives such as joint military exercises, academic exchanges between defence universities, and Arctic-specific research collaborations. These efforts align with NORDEFECO's recent decision¹¹ to enhance military mobility, integrated defence infrastructure, and unmanned aerial system development, fostering mutual operational efficiency and knowledge-sharing. This approach strategically avoids direct provocation toward China and Russia, maintaining a balanced posture while solidifying defence ties with Nordic countries. Furthermore, this partnership could serve as a template for South Korea, Japan, and Singapore to explore similar regional defence frameworks in the Asia-Pacific, addressing shared security challenges without direct NATO involvement.

Developing a joint cybersecurity and undersea cable governance framework

Jointly design a comprehensive governance framework for securing both current and future undersea cables in the Arctic. A collaborative framework would enhance resilience, establish shared responsibilities between governments and private sectors, and set benchmarks for mitigating hybrid threats. Integrating this effort into a broader cybersecurity cooperation,

moreover, would position South Korea and the Nordic countries as global leaders in safeguarding digital infrastructure, ensuring long-term strategic and economic stability in the region.

The author extends his gratitude to Mr. Jihoon Jeong from KOPRI and Dr. Gunnar Rekvig for their valuable comments and constructive feedback on an earlier draft of this work.

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Nordic-Korea Relations– 80 Years of Engagement

By Elin Bergner

Introduction

While there were limited exchanges between the Nordic countries and Korea prior to 1945, the Korean War served as a turning point in the development of formal diplomatic relations. Following the war, Nordic relations* with the two Koreas developed along similar yet contrasting trajectories. Relations with the Republic of Korea (ROK) began with humanitarian medical support following from the war, eventually evolving into the substantial economic exchanges seen today. Conversely, Nordic engagement with the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) commenced decades later, initially driven by economic exchanges but later transitioning to a focus on humanitarian assistance. Nordic foreign policy integration has been instrumental in shaping decisions on war participation, diplomatic recognition, and trade relations with the Koreas. However, these decisions have also been influenced by varying alignments with external powers and domestic political differences among the Nordic countries, which has allowed Sweden to take on additional and unique roles on the peninsula. While Nordic–ROK relations continue to advance steadily, Nordic–DPRK relations, notably those between Sweden and the DPRK, have also endured, even amid Sweden and Finland’s recent accession to NATO, underscoring the durability of these longstanding ties.

Nordic Participation in the Korean War

When the UN Security Council passed Resolution 83 in July 1950, calling for assistance to the ROK, Sweden, Norway, and Denmark responded by dispatching significant medical aid rather than military forces. All three nations sought to actively engage in international politics and shared

* Iceland is excluded from this study due to a lack of material on relations and inconsistencies therein.

concerns that the regional conflict might escalate into a third world war. As beneficiaries of the US Marshall plan funds, they further felt obliged to respond to the US-led call for assistance. The impetus to provide support was thus strong despite the geographical distance, but none of the three countries considered the deployment of troops to be prudent, given the small size of their militaries and the risk of provoking the Soviet Union.

Domestic and external policies, however, introduced notable divergences. Sweden, adhering to its policy of neutrality, balanced the UN request by commissioning the Swedish Red Cross to operate a field hospital under a humanitarian mandate. Norway and Denmark, as new NATO members, faced additional U.S. expectations for support and continued pressure to provide military assistance throughout the war, while providing humanitarian aid. Partially due to continued Nordic coordination efforts, neither Norway nor Denmark ultimately deployed troops, although Norway later transitioned its humanitarian mission into a military one, likely to better align with NATO expectations.

The Nordic hospitals collectively treated over 350.000 civilians during their missions, in addition to conducting trainings for local staff and administrating a vaccination program. This involvement spurred the creation of the Nordic Medical Center (NMC) in 1956, which played a key role in the establishment of diplomatic relations with the ROK. Additionally, the treatment of DPRK and Chinese POWs may have facilitated the later establishment of relations with the DPRK. Following the armistice, Sweden assumed additional roles, most notably in the Neutral Nations Supervisory Commission (NNSC). Established to monitor the armistice, it comprised four neutral nations that had not contributed troops during the war and continues today under evolved circumstances.

Nordic–ROK Relations: From Humanitarian Support to Economic Exchange

In 1948, the Nordic countries declined the ROK's request to establish diplomatic relations, opting for a cautious "wait-and-see" approach to the peninsula conflict. However, during the establishment of the NMC, it became evident that formal relations would aid the process and that the

division of the two Koreas had solidified without a peace treaty. The ROK assumed responsibility for providing buildings, maintenance, and local staff, while the Nordic countries contributed by recruiting foreign personnel, covering salaries, and supplying medical equipment.

An initial attempt by the ROK to establish relations through Sweden failed. Following discussions in the Nordic Council, the Nordics proposed a cost-effective solution of assigning their ambassadors in Tokyo to cover Seoul, but the ROK rejected this, viewing embassy establishment as critical for legitimacy against the DPRK. The Swedish head of the NMC assumed a key role in negotiations, exploring options such as a joint Nordic embassy or granting diplomatic status to NMC staff.

Under growing pressure from the DPRK's expanding diplomatic and economic outreach, Seoul accepted the Nordic proposal in 1959. The Nordic-led NMC was later handed over to the ROK government in 1968. The initiative, credited with contributing to the foundation of the ROK's public health system, saw its final fund closing in 2013.

During the 1970s and 1980s, Nordic-ROK trade grew gradually, focusing on maritime industries, telecommunications, paper mills and industrial machinery. Since the 2000s, trade has expanded significantly, making the ROK a key trading partner for all Nordic nations across various sectors, including the defense sector.

Nordic–DPRK Relations: From Economic Exchange to Humanitarian Support

Relations between the Nordic countries and the DPRK remained largely non-existent until the 1970s, when the DPRK, then the second most industrialized nation in East Asia, began outreach efforts to promote trade. The Nordic nations showed interest in the DPRK, believing it could mirror Japan's economic development. Diplomatic relations were considered essential for engaging in trade with a government that controlled all commerce, which was seen as a stable and less risky option at the time due to support from communist allies. Alongside growing pressure from Nordic businesses, Left-wing political parties also advocated for diplomatic recognition, viewing it as an expression of neutrality.

The primary obstacle to establishing relations at the time was Sweden's involvement in the NNSC. While Sweden and Switzerland recognized only the ROK, Czechoslovakia and Poland recognized only the DPRK. Swedish officials internally expressed concerns that establishing relations with the DPRK could jeopardize their NNSC mission.

In 1972 inter-Korean relations improved and global political shifts occurred, allowing a reassessment of relations. Following discussions in the Nordic Council, diplomatic relations were established between the DPRK and Sweden, Norway, Denmark, and Finland, with the latter concurrently recognizing the ROK. However, initial optimism over potential trade opportunities was quickly dampened when it became clear that the DPRK could not repay the significant debts. Tensions worsened after a smuggling scandal involving North Korean diplomats in all Nordic countries. Despite the challenges, Sweden, the first Western and only Nordic nation to establish an embassy in Pyongyang, maintained its mission.

Trade largely ceased in the 1980s, and by the 1990s, the Nordic countries shifted focus to humanitarian aid as the DPRK faced a severe famine following the Soviet Union's collapse and loss of economic support and widespread destruction of harvests during several years due to flooding and drought. The Nordic countries with Sweden and Finland in the lead have since become the DPRK's largest humanitarian aid providers, with in person missions since 1995 supported by the Swedish embassy.

Nordic –Korea Relations: Diplomacy

The Nordic countries have further played a significant diplomatic role on the Korean Peninsula, from the Korean War to the present. In addition to the NNSC mission, Sweden also investigated DPRK and Chinese bioweapons allegations against the US and supported the Repatriation Committee following the armistice. Until the ROK's democratic transition in 1987, Nordic diplomatic engagement remained limited, likely influenced by external relations. However, the Nordics supported democratic development, notably petitioning the ROK government in 1980 to spare opposition leader Kim Dae-Jung from execution. Today, Nordic-ROK

cooperation spans multiple topics from economy and technology to pop culture and tackling global issues, and relations are anticipated to continue expanding.

In 1994 Sweden assumed the role of protective power for the US in Pyongyang. Following the Swedish Prime Minister's 2000 EU delegation visit to discuss EU-DPRK relations, Sweden appointed an ambassador to its Pyongyang mission, reflecting its recognition of the importance of its unique triple mission on the peninsula. The embassy has been instrumental in facilitating DPRK-West communication and negotiating the release of foreign citizens. Sweden, Norway and Finland have also facilitated trilateral talks involving the DPRK, ROK, and the US on their soil.

Sweden's recent NATO accession has raised concerns about its continued diplomatic roles on the Korean peninsula. However, as NNSC neutrality refers to nations that did not deploy warfighting troops during the Korean War, this should not affect their mission. Sweden has not been neutral since its entry into the EU in 1995 and has a long history of balancing EU considerations with its relations to the Koreas. Norway, a NATO member since 1949, has similarly facilitated recent trilateral talks despite contributing a military, though non-warfighting, presence during the war.

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

The Nordics' continued engagement with the peninsula is rooted in long-term exchanges, supported by limited changes in foreign policy as a result of geographic distance and little domestic opposition, which has fostered familiarity with cultural contexts and sensitive topics. Additionally, it is grounded in a tradition of facilitation rather than mediation, combined with a commitment to discretion and balancing multiple engagements. Rather than positioning themselves as neutral, the Nordic nations present themselves as pragmatic, experienced and integrated partners, offering consistency and a clear sense of what to expect.

The Nordic nations should uphold their balanced approach toward the two Koreas and global engagements. Sweden, in particular, has unique potential to facilitate US-DPRK dialogue under the new US administration, should

talks resume. Given current geopolitical constraints, the Nordics could serve as hosts or offer facilitation support in Southeast Asia. Simultaneously, the Nordics should maintain humanitarian support to the DPRK and, as conditions permit, consider reviving training and exchanges on economic management, technological development, food security and other relevant areas.

Beyond economic cooperation, the Nordic countries and the ROK, as middle powers, should leverage their expertise to address global challenges, including climate change through the green transition and human rights issues. The Nordics should also enhance exchanges on topics of interest to the ROK such as social welfare, education models, and gender equality. Through this approach, the Nordic countries can continue to play a vital role in promoting peace and security on the Korean Peninsula and beyond.

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Assessing Risks in the DPRK for 2025-2030

By Erik Danielsson

Introduction

The Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) presents a persistent challenge for international and regional stability due to its nuclear ambitions, aggressive military posturing, and complex geopolitical entanglements. In this risk assessment, five likely scenarios for the period 2025-2030—natural hazard events, engagement by the Trump administration, increased Russian-DPRK cooperation, incapacitation of Kim Jong Un, and a 7th nuclear test—will be assessed to highlight the diverse risks tied to events originating from the DPRK, their consequences for Northeast Asian security, and provides actionable recommendations on how to respond to these scenarios.

Scenario 1: Natural Hazard Event Damage in the DPRK

It is very likely that recurrent natural hazard events, such as floods, earthquakes, or typhoons will cause damage to infrastructure and vulnerable populations in the DPRK. Although Pyongyang's disaster prevention system has improved, a significant natural disaster is still likely to exacerbate food insecurity, destroy critical infrastructure, and lead to a humanitarian crisis in the northernmost provinces.¹ Pyongyang's prioritization of military spending over public welfare, and the lack of NGO activity in-country since the COVID-19 lockdown, means disaster response capabilities are severely lacking.²

Any international aid effort would be constrained by the DPRK's mistrust of foreign actors and stringent border controls. However, it is somewhat likely that the Russian Federation would be able to provide material support to the DPRK should the natural hazard event damage be extensive and close to the northeast border. The DPRK's history of rejecting foreign aid, even during severe humanitarian crises, reflects its regime's deep-seated

mistrust of external actors and its emphasis on maintaining autarky.³ It is somewhat likely that a major natural hazard event could have unpredictable consequences on DPRK's critical military infrastructure, including nuclear sites, missile production facilities, and military bases.

Scenario 2: Trump Administration Engaging the DPRK

There is a roughly even chance that the Trump administration adopts a policy of engagement towards the DPRK, and this would have an impact on regional stability. The first Trump administration maintained an unorthodox approach to diplomacy with the DPRK, characterized by “fire and fury”, summits and personal letter exchanges with Kim Jong Un.⁴ While engagement temporarily reduced tensions, it lacked substantive agreements on denuclearization and left alliances strained, particularly with South Korea and Japan.

The ongoing political instability in South Korea and the Trump administration's preference towards economic coercion against allies will degrade trust between allies.⁵ Under the new Trump administration the ROK and Japan may also harbor doubts about U.S. commitment if they perceive policies as overly conciliatory or lacking in strategic coherence.⁶ Building and sustaining trust requires the U.S. to actively consult and coordinate with allies, ensuring their security concerns are integrated into any diplomatic strategy. Diplomatic progress with the DPRK is often tied to the priorities and approaches of specific U.S. administrations, resulting in policy fluctuations that disrupt continuity.⁷ Ensuring consistency across administrations requires institutionalizing engagement efforts, fostering bipartisan consensus, and embedding DPRK policy into long-term frameworks that can withstand political changes. Given the current state of U.S. politics and the deep-seated cleavages it is unlikely that bipartisan consensus can be reached on maintaining a lasting policy of engagement towards the DPRK.

Scenario 3: Increased Russian-DPRK Cooperation

It is very likely that the deepening ties between Russia and the DPRK will continue to have a critical impact on regional security. Russia may seek to counterbalance U.S. influence by supporting the DPRK, providing economic lifelines that undermine sanctions or transferring technology that bolsters DPRK capabilities, both military and economic capabilities. This scenario complicates U.S. efforts to isolate the DPRK regime and could embolden provocations. The scope and depth of Russia's support to the DPRK remains uncertain, but it significantly impacts regional stability. While economic support might provide the DPRK with limited support to counteract the international sanctions regime, military technology transfers could elevate the DPRK's offensive capabilities, particularly in air defense, the non-strategic nuclear weapons program, and submarine warfare.⁸ With Russia having lost a close foreign partner in Al-Assad's Syria it is possible that more resources will be designated for the DPRK.

Strengthened ties with Russia is straining its historically closer relationship with China, largely due to Beijing viewing the DPRK's renewed alignment as undermining its influence. Simultaneously, Pyongyang is likely to avoid becoming overly reliant on Moscow, which could constrain its policy independence.⁹

The state of U.S.-Russia relations is also a critical variable in determining the trajectory of Russian support for North Korea. If relations further deteriorate over increasing U.S. support for Ukraine against Russia's illegal war of aggression, Russia might escalate its backing of Pyongyang as a counterbalance to U.S. and her allies influence in the Indo-Pacific. Conversely, a thaw in U.S.-Russia ties could limit Moscow's willingness to deepen engagement with North Korea.

Scenario 4: Incapacitation of Kim Jong Un Due to Health Issues

It is likely that Kim Jong Un's health will deteriorate, and this will have significant consequences for domestic and regional stability. In recent years, concerns have been fueled by reports of his obesity, heavy smoking,

and sedentary lifestyle, all of which contribute to a high risk of chronic illnesses.¹⁰ In 2020, Kim's prolonged absence from public view for 20 days led to rumors of severe health issues, including a possible cardiovascular procedure. South Korean and U.S. intelligence agencies have suggested that Kim suffers from metabolic syndrome-related ailments, such as diabetes and hypertension, and his noticeable weight fluctuations and use of a cane during some public appearances have raised questions about orthopedic or joint problems.¹¹

North Korea's authoritarian system creates a high-risk environment for internal power struggles. Kim Jong Un's incapacitation, without a clear succession plan, could lead to a power vacuum and internal instability. Factional infighting among elites or military figures could escalate, potentially destabilizing the Korean Peninsula. The military elite and senior party officials, who wield significant influence in the State Affairs Commission, could vie for control, leading to factional infighting. The stability of the regime during such a transition would depend on whether a clear and uncontested successor emerges. Ultimately, the incapacitation or death of Kim Jong Un would plunge North Korea into a volatile transition period.

Scenario 5: 7th Nuclear Test

It is unlikely that the DPRK will conduct a 7th nuclear test but if it is carried out it will have a critical impact on regional security. This would signal the regime's intent to solidify its status as a nuclear power and could spark a regional arms race with Japan and South Korea, destabilizing the Indo-Pacific. A 7th nuclear test by the DPRK is likely to provide breakthroughs in miniaturization of tactical nuclear weapons, enhancing the regime's ability to deploy nuclear warheads on short- and medium-range missiles. Such advancements would escalate regional security threats, particularly for South Korea and Japan, while complicating USFK and allied defense strategies.¹²

A new nuclear test is likely to fuel debates in South Korea and Japan about pursuing independent nuclear capabilities to counter the growing threat from Pyongyang. Public and political pressure in these countries to adopt a more robust deterrence posture will strain international nonproliferation

goals and alliances. The extent to which this scenario materializes depends on the perceived inadequacy of the current U.S. nuclear umbrella and the scale of public fear driven by the DPRK's provocations.

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

The DPRK's trajectory remains uncertain, with various risks shaping the regional security landscape between 2025 and 2030. Addressing these challenges requires proactive diplomacy, strengthened alliances, and adaptive strategies to mitigate instability and deter further escalation.

Rekindle Dormant and Establish Additional Communication Channels with DPRK Institutions and Actors

Governmental and non-governmental actors based in Pyongyang should seek to maintain and establish robust and continuous contact with key DPRK counterparts in the Kim family, KPA, MFA and relevant authorities to effectively keep all lines of communication open during a crisis.

Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific Policy Coordination

Due to the increasingly interconnectedness of Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific security, foreign and national security policy actors from liberal democratic states should utilize existing multilateral and bilateral agreements and frameworks to respond to high-risk events quickly and effectively in the DPRK. In particular, it would be beneficial for EU member states to coordinate and engage with their PRC counterparts in Pyongyang on issues that are mutually beneficial.

Flexible and Tailored Policies

Decision makers should consider tailoring responses to events developing on the ground, whether they involve engagement opportunities, provocation or crisis responses. Actors should be more open to reviewing bilateral cooperation avenues and seek to expand inter agency cooperation across foreign, security and humanitarian policy.

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Conclusion

In 2024, the security situation on the Korean Peninsula changed drastically following North Korea indirectly becoming belligerent in Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine and with South Korea's president unexpected declaration of martial law. Combined leading to political uncertainty on the Peninsula and in the region. As a result of this change, new challenges as well as opportunities have emerged. Despite each paper exploring different angles and topics related to the Korean Peninsula, our next generation participants contend that cooperation with the Nordics, the EU, and NATO has potential in addressing some of these challenges that have emerged.

Increased collaboration among South Korea, the Nordics, the EU, and NATO shows potential in various areas. As highlighted by the participants in their respective papers, South Korea is a country that, on many fronts, would complement the Nordics, EU, and NATO's efforts and objectives, both in terms of security, finances and the rule of law. Equally important the Nordics, Nato and EU could support South Korea in a rapidly changing political and business environment. South Korea's current very strong focus on cooperation with the U.S., may be well served with more diversified partnerships. To strengthen such collaboration, South Korea must focus on fostering trust and on its efforts to address the internal issues, repositioning itself as a viable partner. Especially, given the uncertainties over South Korea's political path in the coming 6 months to potentially a year, the country must create long-term strategies and incorporate a more detailed strategic plan for expanding foreign cooperation.

To address future challenges, increased cooperation and dialogue with North Korea through the collaboration of both governmental and non-governmental entities is critical in combination with reliable and effective deterrence and defensive efforts. European and Indo-Pacific parties, in particular, may be more inclined to do so, as there is a growing understanding of European-Asian growing security interdependence. Evidenced by North Korea and Russia's increasing coordination, which has resulted in North Korean soldiers being deployed in Ukraine. The Nordics could also prove

advantageous partners in building communication channels with North Korea, particularly Sweden, which reopened its embassy in Pyongyang in 2024 and continues its NNSC mission. Sweden, and the broader Nordic region, are viewed as trustworthy nations, and have maintained good faith relations with North Korea ever since the Korean War and could prove critical for developing better diplomatic relations in the future. At a time when we had very limited person interactions with the North for almost four years, even limited interaction could be of value.

As highlighted in one of the papers, new frontiers for cooperation are opening. The Arctic is one where the Nordics with extensive knowledge and tailormade capabilities in many different fields can offer South Korea new opportunities. Another new frontier is green transition, where the Nordics are investing heavily and where both the Nordics and South Korea could benefit from more collaborate efforts, not least in reaching out to the developing world offering an alternative to Chinese dependence.

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