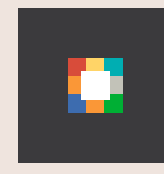


# News from Northeast Asia

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## North Korea in the eyes of the Nordic region and China

Kyuhoon CHO

COVERAGE OF NORTH KOREA in the mainstream global media has been overwhelmingly negative, and a standardized understanding of North Korea, strengthened over time and through repetition, has spread and crystallized throughout global society. As a result, alternative approaches or standpoints with regard to North Korea are viewed with doubt and skepticism. In this issue of *News from Northeast Asia*, we depart from this kind of globalized perspective and examine North Korea from the lesser known positions of countries in Northern Europe, which have maintained diplomatic relations with North Korea over a long period of time, and online communities in China, North Korea's strongest ally.

In 'A Nordic inspiration for sustainable peace on the Korean peninsula?', Geir Helgesen of the Nordic Institute of Asian Studies (NIAS) presents his belief that the experience of societies in Northern Europe in transforming a long history of conflict into a relationship of peace and cooperation can provide inspiration for peace-building on the Korean peninsula. Gleaning lessons from the case of Northern Europe, he found that cultural differences impede the understanding of the actions of a counterpart and can be very difficult to

overcome. On the other hand, shared values and norms can become the foundation for cooperation. Demonization of North Korea in the past 20 years has made obscure the fact that the way of life of North Koreans is culturally very similar to other East Asian societies.

In the second article, 'North Korea from a Norwegian perspective', Norwegian Ambassador to South Korea Jan Grevstad puts forth Oslo's official position toward the regime in Pyongyang. Having maintained diplomatic relations with North Korea since 1973, Norway has continued to provide humanitarian aid to North Korea regardless of political change. At the same time, the Norwegian government has denounced North Korea over its human rights issues and supported multilateral sanctions on North Korea for defying international law with its nuclear development program. Grevstad argues

that understanding North Korea's situation can be the first step toward valuable discussions on the country.

'Perspectives on North Korea and the North Korean nuclear issue in Chinese online media' reveals through an analysis of mainstream Chinese media that there is a diversity of opinions and attitudes to North Korea in Chinese society existing beyond the official stance of Beijing. Jeong-Hoon Lee examines discussions on popular internet forums in China and finds a mix of opinions on North Korea among various social cohorts – the realist perspective of the highly educated middle class, the non-ideological and negative views of the youth, and the idealistic perspective of those who regard North Korea an authentic socialist regime.

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### A Nordic inspiration for sustainable peace on the Korean peninsula?

Geir Helgesen

THE NORDIC REGION<sup>1</sup> has been able to turn a long history of conflict into a modern era of cooperation. Our conflicting history has not been hidden, but neither is it used as an ideological tool to fuel present conflicts of interests and general disagreements. *Past is past, let's do it better onwards*, seems to be a Nordic consensus. The five independent countries are bound together into a unified entity, in particular, by our common cultural traits: we share basic values and norms, and have decided to stress the similarities and respect the still existing differences between us. The Nordic region is possibly the best integrated region in the present world, and it is the regional cooperation with the strongest popular support.

#### What is the potential relevance of this for Korea?

Some facts are quite similar between the Nordic region and the East Asian region: a history of animosities and conflicts between the neighbors, and, at the same time a basically common cultural heritage, with common values and norms. Differences between the two regions are many, with size as an obvious and visible one. The two regions are also dealing with the history of conflict in different ways, and, the division between the four countries in the East Asian region is fortified by different and opposing political and ideological positions.

The similarities and differences between our two regions consists of elements that cannot be changed, but also politically based facts, that that can be altered, if there is political will and popular support. Size and

history cannot be changed, while how these facts are dealt with, how they are invested in political ideologies and visions, is a matter of choice, although often hard choices. They are not free to be made, as culture is a harder fact than most people are able to understand.

What we cherish or dislike, see as true or false, good or bad, right or wrong, is to a certain degree affected by our cultural environment. In the Nordic region, even if we at present are living in a post-Christian era, all of us are colored by Lutheran Protestantism in particular. The moral values and the worldview developed based on this northern European Christian faith affect our societal norms, our political thinking, our Constitution and the laws that govern our societies and societal actions. In the East Asian region other religious, moral, and philosophical thoughts make up the backbone of societal constructs. Confucianism is, in my view, a fundamental basis, but Shamanism, Buddhism, and also Christianity, add to the overall pattern that form the basis of social morality, societal life, politics and world outlook of the people in the East Asian region.

Such a sweeping generalization is necessary in order to relate to and open-mindedly discuss issues informed by our heritage, albeit not easy. I have met Korean friends in the South who have a very difficult time accepting Koreans from another province in their own country, not to speak of people from Japan. Their dislike is not based on personal experiences, but on learned 'truths'. It's not that there are no reasons for animosities; sad and gruesome historical facts often make it difficult to look ahead and move forwards. Nevertheless, moving forward is necessary and to the benefit of all concerned, and should be a common aim.

Years ago, while visiting North Korea, I had a number of serious conversations with people in my proximity, people with whom I had a positive relationship. I wanted to know if they actually saw their country as a totally new entity, a post-war 'Kim Il-Sung-land' with its Juche ideology, untainted by past experiences, including the '5000 years of history', also in the North mentioned with pride. They always said yes, in the first instance. They claimed that their system was totally new and they gave a host of arguments and examples in support of this position. If I expressed a willingness to try and understand this, and respect *their* view, the dialogue would usually continue. Then I would maintain my own position, which was and is, that we all, to some extent, are *cultural constructs*, and that even new ideas and political ideologies are in debt to the past, which moreover is a necessity for the new to be rooted and to grow in the local soil. My North Korean dialogue partners could see this point, but were worried if I stressed it too

much. "It makes sense, what you are saying", was the general reaction, "but please do not overstate the importance of the past, our system is created by our leader and he knows what is best for us, like the father in a family..."

The northern half of the peninsula has made an effort to create a self-reliant entity, and to realize this it has fenced itself in and has kept relations with the outside world at a minimum. During the later years of a military build-up on both sides of the demarcation line, and in particular when nuclear ambitions became a military priority for the North Korean leadership, the USA, followed by its allies and most Western powers and the UN Security Council responded with an ever tightening embargo. To the self-imposed isolation is added an externally imposed one. Who gains, except those who fear change?

Currently it might be difficult to envisage a dialogue as the one described above. A main reason is that the years that have passed since my small and informal survey in Pyongyang have been filled with mutual accusations and hatred, and during the last couple of decades North Korea has been *demonized* to the extent that it is hard to imagine the existence of normal people 'up North'. But they are there, and they are not that different from their country fellowmen in the South, or from Japanese and Chinese fellowmen, for that matter. There is a cultural similarity to build on!

A Nordic inspiration to, and possible intervention for, peace and mutual understanding between the Koreas could be based on experiences with Nordic regional cooperation, and, on the newly acquired knowledge about the impact and importance of cultural affinity among people in neighboring countries for the success of regional cooperation. As there are longstanding diplomatic relations between the two Koreas and the Nordic countries, such a humanitarian and long-term involvement should be possible and within the accepted limits of the ongoing embargo, and an activity that aims at a positive solution for all parties concerned.

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#### Reference

- 1 Five independent countries, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden, organized as one cooperative region through the Nordic Council, the parliamentary cooperative body, and the Nordic Council of Ministers, the governmental body of cooperation, as well as several public and private bodies within the fields of economy, culture, sports etc.

Above: Pyongyang, North Korea. Image reproduced under a creative commons license courtesy of Stephan on Flickr.