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# **Why Stay Engaged with a State Deemed Fragile?**

**The Case of Sweden toward the  
Democratic People's Republic of Korea**

**Magnus Andersson and Jinsun Bae\***

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## **Abstract**

Based on the constructivist international relations (IR) approach, the authors study Sweden's engagement with the DPRK as a unique case to understand motivations for engaging in a so-called fragile state. Besides having its embassy in Pyongyang and serving as a protecting power for the U.S., Sweden has provided capacity building programs for North Korean government officials and scholars. It has also made a consistent commitment to aid and human rights advocacy. In a nutshell, Sweden has been a facilitator between the DPRK and the outside world. Its motivations are mixed and multiple, including the expectation of gains, the convenience of repeating the work and the logic of appropriateness.

This case expands our understanding of engagement that is often understood to a great degree as a rationalist affair between the engaging and target states. It also affirms the usefulness of constructivist IR approach in accounting for today's engagement practices involving more stakeholders and less strict cost-benefit calculation.

## **Keywords**

Sweden, DPRK, engagement, foreign policy, constructivism, fragile state, capacity building, human rights, Pyongyang embassy, protecting power.





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## Introduction

The term engagement is no longer reserved only for people in love or two former Cold War enemies. As a foreign policy, it has become more common to engage in the affairs of other states – especially those exhibiting multiple conditions of fragility – via such channels as political dialogue, peace-building missions, and development aid. This phenomenon, seemingly at odds with a rationalist calculation of self-interest, deserves a complex and nuanced investigation.

Like many others, this paper raises a question: What keeps an external state engaged in a state despite its multiple conditions of fragility? Distinctively, this paper approaches possible answers by understanding how the concept of engagement is perceived and operationalized in the engaging state. We resort to the constructivist IR approach for steering our theoretical analysis.

## Constructivist IR Approach

Constructivism has gained its theoretical prominence as a complementary critique to the realist logic in explaining a state and the international relations. Realists see the state's interest as defined in terms of power, highlighting security and survival as every state's principal concerns, and focus on discovering objective laws to explain state behavior in international politics (Morgenthau, 2006). Realists believe the international system's anarchic structure constrains states to either compete for dominance or to balance power or threat. A state is assumed as an unitary actor, and its international organizations are viewed as functionally undifferentiated (Waltz, 1979 in Katzenstein, 1996: 17). Together with liberals, they argue that the mechanism of rational choice lies behind such competitive nature of states (Wendt, 1992: 391).

Constructivists provide complementary insights. From their ontological standpoint the social world is constructed via “intersubjectively and collectively meaningful structures and processes;” even the realist premise of an anarchic world becomes a constructed condition (Adler, 2002: 108). Contrary to the neorealist argument that structures constrain actors and not vice versa, constructivists believe such influence works both ways (Wendt, 1992: 397–398). Actors collectively assign meanings to the structures they belong to, and these meanings constitute and thus constrain the structures.

Based on this reasoning, constructivists claim the international system is shaped not only by a struggle for power. They view ideas, norms, and shared understandings as important drivers of state actions in IR that traditional

realists have overlooked (Jackson and Sorensen, 2007: 162; for exemplary studies, read Katzenstein, 1996; Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998; Checkel, 2001) and have revisited key realist IR concepts such as anarchy and self-help (Wendt, 1992).

## Conceptualizing Engagement

The constructivist IR approach is useful when accounting for complex political changes often overshadowed by broadly defined catch-all terms. Frequently appearing in foreign policy and international relations, the term engagement has often been used without clever conceptualization (Suettinger, 2000 in Resnick, 2001: 552 & 554). Some scholars broadly capture it as a foreign policy strategy to affect a change in the target state's behaviors (Johnston & Ross in Resnick, 2001; Haass and O'Sullivan, 2000; Kahler and Kastner, 2006). It is also viewed as a post-Cold War project to integrate an isolated country peacefully into the international order and market economy architected by Western democracies (Lake, 1993; Shambaugh, 1996; Gill, 1999). Some scholars attempt to capture engagement based on the foreign policies of specific U.S. administrations attempting to shift away from their containment-seeking predecessors (Resnick (2001) on former President Clinton's engagement; Lord and Lynch (2010) on President Obama's global engagement).<sup>1</sup> A skeptical version assumes a target state will not fundamentally change and means to offer carrots for compliance while simultaneously pursuing an engaging state's own military build-up (Cha, 2002).

Lately, the term engagement has been lifted from bilateral foreign policy and employed to describe international cooperation efforts to help countries suffering from poverty, conflict, and other immensurable challenges. The attacks of September 11 in 2001 alarmed the Western world and made it realize that sources of insecurity grow in countries where state institutions are unable to deliver necessary goods and services to citizens, eventually posing a global threat (De biel et al., 2005: 2; Menocal, 2011: 1719–1720; Nussbaum et al., 2012: 560). Given this awareness, major donor countries represented by the Development Assistance Committee in Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) have been speaking about “international engagement,” highlighting their roles in facilitating, not

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<sup>1</sup> Resnick noted different meanings of engagement employed by the Clinton administration, which can be summarized as (1) an overall strategic reorientation in foreign policy from its predecessor's and (2) bilateral policies that provide conditional concessions; increasing contacts in areas of mutual interest; and technical assistance to facilitate political and economic liberalizations (2011: 552–3)

replacing, national reformers in fragile states to “build effective, legitimate and resilient institutions, capable of engaging productively with their people” (2007). Compared to engagement in a bilateral sense, this international version presumes a normative reason for helping weaker states to survive together and calls to move beyond the calculation of short-term national interests. Engagers are advised only to assist, not to dominate, because people of the target state should champion their own ways out of poverty and conflict.

## **Conceptualizing Fragile State or State Fragility**

There are a plethora of labels for a state with many problems – fragile, failed, failing, weak, underperforming, and collapsed, to name a few. Two of the most internationally recognized terms are failed and fragile states. The concept of a failed state gained scholarly attention in the wake of increased civil wars, ethnic conflicts, and other problems post-Cold War (Call, 2011: 305). Early definitions of the failed state point to symptoms such as the state’s inability to sustain itself, dominance of local powers and militia, poverty, social disorder, lawlessness, and failure to control borders (Helman and Ratner, 1992; Zartman, 1995). Gros adds that a failed state is “consistently” unable to protect its citizens (2011), and Rotberg argues failed states like Somalia and the two states of Sudan exhibit “endured violence” (2003).

Over time the adjective “failed” grew less relevant, except to very few states. The international community has committed a tremendous volume of material and non-material assistances to states deemed failing, and central authorities of such states like Afghanistan have continued to exist albeit weakly or ineffectively (Stepputat and Engberg-Pedersen, 2008). Instead, “fragile” has been more commonly used by international development actors in particular. Two widely-used definitions have been proposed by the OECD and the World Bank. The OECD views a fragile state as “unable to meet its population’s expectations or manage changes in expectations and capacity through the political process” (Jones and Chandran, 2008). The World Bank applies quantitative criteria based on the state’s performance in economic management, structural policies, policies for social inclusion and equity, and public sector management and institutions (World Bank). A number of international and national organizations adopt either; the European Commission (Giovannetti, 2009) and the Dutch Ministry of Development Cooperation policy (2008) endorsed that of the OECD. Some organizations like the Swedish International Development Agency do not explicitly define

the fragile state but resort to symptomatic descriptions. The UK Department for International Development has its own definition, viewing a fragile state as unable and unwilling to deliver core functions to its people (UK Department for International Development).

In the 2000s, the discourse on failed and fragile states faced criticism. Critiques problematize an underlying connotation of these terms as if there is a static, pre-determined end which a fragile or failed state should meet but was unsuccessful (Di John, 2008; Stepputat and Engberg-Pedersen, 2008). The rhetoric of a state failure or fragility is considered politically stigmatizing (Collier, 2007) and exhibits a Western-biased and paternalistic overtone (Call, 2008; van Overbeek et al., 2009). Empirical concerns include ignoring a diversity of state characters and failing to recognize culture-specific authority structures other than state bureaucracies (Lund, Menkaus, and Boege in van Overbeek et al., 2009).

A coping strategy in lieu of the wholesale rejection is to modify or unpack this contested concept. Development agencies now employ a broader concept such as “fragility” or “situations of fragility.” The label “fragile state” creates the confusion that fragility is a condition specific to certain problematic states. By separating fragility from statehood, the alternatives above can remove a country bias (McCloughlin, 2012). Some critical scholars define fragility as a set of shortages in service, security, and legitimacy (Stewart and Brown, 2009; Call, 2011).

## Research Methodology

We focus on Sweden’s engagement to the DPRK as a unique case of engagement (Yin, 2003: 41). The DPRK is one of the countries with which Western states are least engaged, marked with long-lasting poverty and political repression.<sup>2</sup> Yet, Sweden has maintained diplomatic ties with the country since it established diplomatic relations in 1973 and has offered various forms of assistance to facilitate the DPRK’s stability as a country and its linkage to the outside world. Given that such practice may appear counter-intuitive, it is not only interesting to study in its own right but can enrich our

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<sup>2</sup> Triggered by a sharp decrease in food production as well as inefficient delivery of food, a famine hit the country in 1994 and claimed the lives of between 250,000 to 1.17 million people (UN OCHA, 1998; Haggard and Noland, 2009). Since then, the DPRK suffers from weak food security, a failure to deliver needed goods to its citizens (which resulted in making the informal economy thrive), widespread bribery (Lankov and Kim, 2008; Joo, 2010), and limited civil liberties (Amnesty International, 2009; Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs, 2010b), etc.

understanding of engagement by examining underlying forces that have enabled this distinctive case.

We endorse Resnick's (2001) definition of engagement and Call's definition (2011) of fragility. Unlike many other conceptualizers, Resnick highlights engagement as an "exchange relationship," recognizing the target state's agency in shaping engagement outcomes and increased interdependence between the engager and the target (2011: 560).<sup>3</sup> Regarding fragility, Call (2011) proposes to view it as having gaps in capacity, security, and legitimacy (see the box below for an elaboration of each gap). He remains cautious in prescribing strategies to address such gaps. Firstly, there is no universal agreement on what capacity, security, or legitimacy respectively means. Even though each gap is inter-related, it cannot be conflated as a direct cause for other gaps or fragility as a whole.<sup>4</sup> Operationalizing his definition therefore necessitates giving due consideration to political, historical, social, and cultural contexts of a concerned state (ibid: 311 & 316).

*Three gaps instead of fragility*

Capacity gap: when state institutions are "incapable of delivering minimal public goods and services to the population" (with a context-specific understanding on the degree of being 'minimal').

Security gap: when state institutions "do not provide minimal levels of security in the face of organized armed groups".

Legitimacy gap: when "a significant portion of its political elites and society reject the rules regulating the exercise of power and the accumulation and distribution of wealth".

Source: Call (2011: 306–308)

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<sup>3</sup> To make engagement work as an effective foreign policy, three conditions should be met:

1) an initial degree of contacts between the sender and target states must be low  
2) the target state has a significant need for material resources or reputational power  
3) the sender state and the international community are perceived as having material or reputational resources that the target state desires.

<sup>4</sup> Take Bangladesh as a case in point. The country suffers from poverty as a result of a capacity gap but does not manifest a worrying degree of a security gap. Of course, there are states with multiple gaps mutually enforcing each other, such as Afghanistan, Sudan, etc. But, one gap does not always beget another.



Considering these, Sweden's engagement to the DPRK in this paper is delineated as following:

*Swedish government-supported activities toward the DPRK exist across multiple issue areas, with an aim to influence the target state's political behaviors in ways conducive to address its gaps in capacity, security, and legitimacy.*

This is a qualitative research based on an extensive study of published secondary materials in English, Korean, and Swedish. We include semi-structured interviews of individuals who have taken part in Swedish engagement programs.<sup>5</sup> Even in Sweden, a country known for open access to public information, details on its engagement to the DPRK are kept confidential to avoid unnecessary publicity and negative repercussions on its cooperation with DPRK counterparts. Engagement actors are cautious about revealing their work; some declined to be interviewed despite guaranteed anonymity.

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

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

Sweden made its first official presence in the DPRK in 1953 as a member state of the Neutral Nations Supervisory Commission (NNSC) together with Switzerland, Poland, and Czechoslovakia.<sup>6</sup> In the early 1970s, Sweden forged ties with the DPRK for economic interests. At that time, the DPRK attempted rapid industrial development and began importing the required production equipment from Japan and Western Europe. Swedish exporters made contracts to sell motorcars, trucks, and other heavy machines, the total value of which accrued to 1,000 million Swedish Krona in the currency value of that time. To facilitate business transactions, eager Swedish businessmen pushed their Ministry for Foreign Affairs (MFA) to establish an embassy in

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<sup>5</sup> Interviewees were guaranteed full confidentiality for their names and professional associations. The authors also promised to treat their statements in a way so that their identities cannot be inferred. A total of six respondents were interviewed in April and May 2013. Each interview took from 30 minutes to one-and-a-half hours. The majority of interview questions were commonly applied, with a few that we tailored in view of each respondent's responsibilities. Interviewees include: one member of Sveriges Riksdag (Swedish Parliament), two senior-level officials in the Swedish MFA, and three practitioners who have organized training programs for North Koreans.

<sup>6</sup> The NNSC's main responsibility is to oversee the truce and maintain communications between the two Koreas. The DPRK forced out Poland and Czechoslovakia (chosen by the DPRK and China as neutral NNSC members) in the mid-1990s as these countries underwent democratization (Donga Newspaper, 2004).

Pyongyang. That embassy has existed to this day since 1975 (Cornell, 2002: 5 & 9).<sup>7</sup>

Stories of Swedish engagement with the DPRK in the 1980s are few and far between, which attests to general inactivity during the period. In addition to the decline in bilateral economic exchanges, the diplomatic scandal in 1976 that DPRK embassies in Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden were caught selling alcohol and cigarettes on the black market froze the country's bilateral relations with Nordic countries (Cornell, 2002: 62; Winn, 1987: 310). Nevertheless, Sweden stayed engaged in the DPRK in part to remind the country of its economic duty (Interviewee #3, 2013).<sup>8</sup> Remaining there was not an exceptional decision at that time. During the Social Democratic regime under Olof Palme (1969–76 and 1982–86) that publicly declared an anti-Imperialist stance, Sweden was expanding its diplomatic relations with North Vietnam, Laos, and other nations where Western democracies least engaged (Lintner, 2004).

In the early 1990s Sweden considered withdrawing from the DPRK but changed its mind. The signing of the Agreed Framework in 1994 between the DPRK and U.S. was understood as an impending sign of hope and imminent peace, followed by the U.S. government's request in 1995 for Sweden to serve as its protecting power in the DPRK (Interviewee #6).<sup>9</sup> Coincidentally, the famine broke in the early 1990s, and Sweden decided to stay and assist with famine relief. With this historical backdrop, we now turn to examine the Swedish engagement in the 2000s in view of the DPRK's gaps in capacity, security, and legitimacy.<sup>10</sup>

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

Call argues that an engaging state should assist a target state in strengthening its state institutions so that they can regain control over and exercise an effective delivery of core public goods and services (2011: 312). In this

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<sup>7</sup> Erik Cornell, the first Swedish ambassador to the DPRK, recounts in his memoir that he devoted much of his preparation time with the Swedish Export Council. Hopes of Swedish exporters however went unfulfilled because the DPRK did not pay for the contracts. The DPRK has a debt to Sweden that totals USD 370 million (NTD News, 2012).

<sup>8</sup> All the interviews were conducted in 2013. From now on, we will omit mentioning the year.

<sup>9</sup> The 1994 Agreed Framework was signed between the U.S. and the DPRK, stipulating the replacement of the DPRK's nuclear power plant program with light water reactor power plants and progressive normalization of bilateral relations. Until 2001, Sweden was the only Western country to have an embassy in Pyongyang. As of the late 1990s, it was a protecting power for the U.S., Australia, Germany, and Canada (Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs, 1998).

<sup>10</sup> As Call notes, it is empirically hard to solely address one gap without affecting others; addressing each gap requires a distinctive logic (2001: 312 & 316). Mindful of this possible overlap, we arbitrarily classify different Swedish engagement activities in view of the three gaps.

context, Sweden has addressed the DPRK's capacity gap in two ways: humanitarian aid and capacity building programs.

The DPRK's famine prompted Sweden to step out of its long period of inactivity. Sweden pledged aid, a total of which amounted to 80 million Swedish Krona. It became a major single country donor after the U.S., Japan, and the ROK (Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs, 1998: 318). Since then, Swedish aid commitment has remained consistent and steady in volume even when other donors dramatically reduced aid due to the nuclear tests in 2006 and 2009. As the U.S., the ROK, and Japan halted bilateral aid, Sweden became the top single country donor toward the late 2000s. Its aid is mostly delivered via multilateral channels (i.e. the UN) to support their operations and NGO programs in food security, agriculture, and increasingly the health sectors (Jung, 2012).<sup>11</sup>

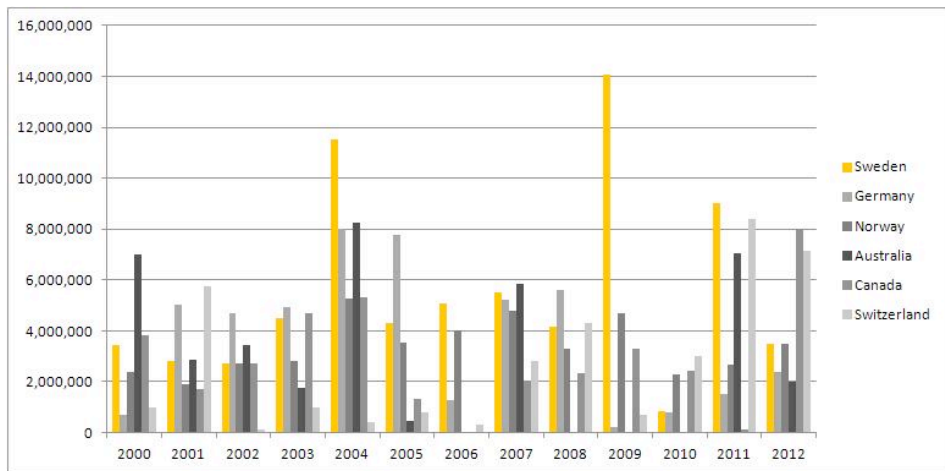
*Table 1. Sweden's humanitarian aid contribution 2000 – 2012*

	00	01	02	03	04	05	06	07	08	09	10	11	12
% of total aid	1.5	0.7	0.8	2.5	3.8	9.4	12.7	5.4	7.3	22.9	3.5	10.1	3
Funding (USD millions)	3.4	2.8	2.7	4.5	11.5	4.3	5	5.5	4.2	14	0.85	9	3.5
Ranking as single state donor	6	8	5	7	4	2	2	3	5	2	4	1	7

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<sup>11</sup> NGOs that received funds from the Swedish government for DPRK projects are: PMU Interlife (Sweden), Triangle (France), Concern Worldwide (headquarters in Ireland), Premiere Urgence (France), Save the Children UK (UN OCHA).

*Graph 1. Sweden's humanitarian aid to the DPRK from 2000 – 2012*



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

Although numerical figures about aid to the DPRK are published, the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida)’s overall scheme of development cooperation strategies allows non-disclosure of specific activities. The DPRK, along with other politically sensitive countries, belongs to a special category where development strategies are decided case-by-case due to the practical difficulty of pursuing a standard state-to-state cooperation (Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs, 2010a: 47). The procedures and operations of the strategies are rarely publicized.

Capacity building programs for DPRK officials and scholars compose another hallmark of Swedish engagement. In the late 1990s, the DPRK asked Sweden to provide training on Western economic thinking programs, of which preparation was accelerated when the Swedish Prime Minister Göran Persson visited Pyongyang in 2001 (Interviewee #5). Since Sweden chaired the EU council in that year, Persson also brought EU Troika\* to Pyongyang and contributed to the establishment of an EU-DPRK diplomatic relation (Berkofsky, 2009: 18; Fitzpatrick, 2012: 13).<sup>12</sup> Until recently, Sweden has offered knowledge transfer programs aimed at addressing various skills needs

\* EU troika refers to the Minister of Foreign Affairs of its member state holding the presidency of the Council of Ministers, the Secretary-General of the EU Council, and the European Commissioner for External Relations.

<sup>12</sup> Since the establishment of EU-DPRK diplomatic relations in 2001, 26 EU member states have followed suit (except France). Seven of them have resident embassies in Pyongyang: Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Germany, Poland, Romania, Sweden, and the UK (Fitzpatrick, 2012).

of North Koreans. The following overviews some long-running programs:

- From 2002 to 2009, the European Institute of Japanese Studies (EIJIS) at the Stockholm School of Economics arranged two-week-long workshops for DPRK policy planners and academics. Each workshop provided lectures covering a wide range of topics on economic modernization, including basic accounting, management, international trade, and Vietnam's economic reform experiences (Park and Jung, 2007: 13; Swedish Embassy in Pyongyang, 2012).

- The International Council of Swedish Industry (Näringslivets Internationella Råd, NIR) brings DPRK participants to Stockholm. They attend seminars on different topics of market economy and Swedish economic mechanisms, and visit Swedish companies and organizations (NIR; Local, 2012).

- Since 2005, a Stockholm-based research institute, the Institute for Security and Development Policy (ISDP), has hosted North Korean researchers from the Institute for Disarmament and Peace (IDP).<sup>13</sup> Invited researchers stay up to one month at the ISDP to engage in academic exchanges and to publish academic papers. In May 2012, the ISDP initiated a workshop on topics of crisis management incorporating topical seminars given by researchers from the ISDP and the Swedish Armed Forces, as well as organization visits to think tanks and government agencies (ISDP, 2012).<sup>14</sup>

- Sida's International Training Programmes (ITP) has engaged North Koreans. ITP provides courses to cater to the skills needs of managerial-level officials and individuals from developing countries around the world (Sida, 2012). In 2009, a Swedish newspaper *Arbetsblad* reported about two North Koreans taking ITP courses on urban land registration and Geographical Information System technology (Karlström, 2009). Reportedly, about 20 North Koreans annually took part in ITP (Swedish Embassy in Pyongyang, 2012).

In summary, Sweden has been cautiously yet consistently addressing the capacity gap via aid and educational outreach to North Korean elites and

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<sup>13</sup> The IDP is a think tank under the DPRK Foreign Ministry. Its staff undergoes rotation along with individual diplomatic services.

<sup>14</sup> Places they visited: the Swedish Defense Research Agency, the Stockholm Environmental Institute, the Folke Bernadotte Academy, the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, and the NIR.

bureaucrats. There is some concern that knowledge transfer programs merely enhance DPRK's governing power without effectively addressing its "exclusionary and authoritative tendencies" that Call views as gaps in internal legitimacy (2011: 314; Gustafsson, 2003).<sup>15</sup> It is not this paper's ambition to evaluate the claimed trade-off between a capacity gap and a legitimacy gap. In a later section we will discuss how Sweden has been responding to the latter gap.

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

Call states that a security gap occurs when a state cannot secure "minimal levels of security in the face of organized armed groups" (2011: 307). While the DPRK does not have such an imminent internal security threat, its leadership claims to be at risk from the imperial ambitions of the U.S. and like-minded nations. Such an argument lays the rhetorical ground for the DPRK's military actions and nuclear ambitions, which destabilize regional and global securities. When the DPRK militarily provokes instability, international opinions toward the DPRK government worsen, and engagement efforts and aid inflow diminish. Those who bear the costs of such repercussions are DPRK citizens. Food prices in shadow markets may soar due to supply shortage, which potentially triggers widespread lack of food provision at the household level. The citizens may be forced to participate more frequently in symbolic military campaigns against the imperial West at the cost of concentrating their time and effort on food provision, income generating activities, or self-cultivation. As such, the DPRK's virtual insecurity is a real concern because it offsets opportunities to enhance the livelihood and well being of individual citizens.

Sweden has been indirectly addressing this virtual gap by assuming a role of facilitator, most notably during Göran Persson's time. After the historic summit between the two Koreas in 2000, when Dae-jung Kim the former ROK president and Nobel Peace laureate met with Persson, Kim expressed his wish for Sweden to arrange an EU high-level visit to Pyongyang. The informant presumed his suggestion was to provide a sign of sustainable commitment after the summit and to increase the DPRK's contact with the outside world, first with the more approachable EU (Interviewee #1). Persson's administration was also motivated to launch training programs upon learning that Kim Jong-il the state leader of the DPRK then had mentioned to

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<sup>15</sup> For example, the Christian Democrat parliamentarian Holger Gustafsson submitted a written question to the government, asking how it was ensuring that the DPRK government effectively delivers the Swedish aid so that it reaches the populace in dire need.

the U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright his wish to learn the Swedish Model (Interviewees #3 & #5). To facilitate communications between the DPRK and major country stakeholders, the former Swedish ambassador to Pyongyang Paul Beijer served as the Special Advisor to the Swedish Government on Korean Peninsula Issues from 2006 to 2008 (Interviewee #3).

Through having a rare, long-standing Pyongyang embassy, Sweden provides services for other countries. Today Sweden is a protecting power for Australia, Canada, and the U.S.<sup>16</sup> It has consular representation for all Nordic countries and handles Schengen applications for citizens of Italy, Spain, and the Nordic countries. Sweden's guardianship for the U.S. came under heavy media spotlight when the Swedish ambassador had consular access to two American journalists detained in the DPRK in 2009 for charges of illegal entry and engaging in "hostile" acts (Associated Press, 2009). Besides the consular work and other tasks depending on the various upcoming needs of the U.S., Sweden as its protecting power looks after, briefs and gives advice to humanitarian workers and visiting delegations from the U.S. (Interviewee #6). Swedish diplomats are sought after for their insights and knowledge on the DPRK, upon meeting with its government officials (Jung, 2001; Kim, 2009).

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

According to Call (2011), the DPRK is considered one of the least legitimate states, failing to provide the governing transparency and the space for citizens to freely express their opinions and thoughts (310). In his view, addressing the legitimacy gap means to support "counterweights to exclusionary and authoritarian tendencies" of the ruling power (314). In this regard, addressing human rights concerns in the target state is an inevitable task. The leadership in Pyongyang has resisted openly discussing domestic human rights issues since they view the human rights discourse as an imperialist tool to interfere with internal affairs (Lee, 2011).

Sweden once provided human rights training to North Korean delegates, but no such program is ongoing.<sup>17</sup> Since 2001, the Raoul Wallenberg Institute at Lund University received North Korean participants in its human rights education course offered via Sida's ITP (Interviewee #4). In 2003, the

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<sup>16</sup> Sweden's services to Australia and Canada as a protecting power have changed in scope as a result of the establishment of diplomatic relations between these two countries and the DPRK. To date the tasks are mostly consular.

<sup>17</sup> Sweden has long engaged other Asian countries such as China, Laos, and Vietnam in human rights topics. Sida has funded human rights training in these countries. Their officials and non-governmental entities have also come to Sweden to take courses on human rights.

DPRK withdrew from the program, citing the EU's support for a UN resolution condemning its human rights situation as the reason (Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs, 2005). When Sweden has occasional bilateral meetings with the DPRK, it reportedly raises human rights concerns. The former Swedish ambassador to the ROK Lars Vargö confirmed having bilateral human rights dialogues with the director of the Europe department within the DPRK Foreign Affairs Ministry. During the dialogue, Sweden urged the DPRK to accept a visit request by the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in North Korea and advised that the EU would positively consider the DPRK's constitutional revision in 2008 that newly included the word "human rights" in view of an upcoming resolution concerning human rights situations in the DPRK (Kim, 2009).

Interestingly, Sweden's discreet bilateral human rights diplomacy co-exists with its active participation in international advocacy demanding the DPRK government step up its human rights performance. Sweden has supported every UN resolution demanding the government protect and guarantee citizens' rights. Recently, Sweden sponsored the draft statement of the UN Human Rights Council resolution to establish a commission of inquiry into human rights concerns in the DPRK (Haggard, 2013). In solidarity with other EU states, Sweden has implemented UN and EU economic sanctions and took part in EU-DPRK annual human rights dialogues that have not existed since 2006 (Swedish Embassy in Pyongyang, 2012).

Until now, Sweden has delicately balanced its bilateral and multilateral human rights diplomacies while the DPRK government remains resistant to having an open discussion about domestic human rights issues. Behind the DPRK's reluctance, one can read its governing power's fear that acknowledging domestic human rights problems may weaken their internal and external legitimacies. Sweden managed to address human rights concern by credibly showing that it is not after a regime change (Kim, 2009). Yet, its engagement efforts and the impact felt by DPRK citizens largely depend on the DPRK side's willingness to cooperate.

## **Facilitation as Engagement**

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

There is no single authoritative policy document that defines and guides Sweden's engagement activities to the DPRK. Instead, multiple documents



released from the Swedish MFA commonly state the country should be ready to assist the DPRK if it moves toward economic and political reforms (The Asia Strategy Project, 1999; the Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs, 2005; the Swedish Embassy in Pyongyang, 2012). The country report on the DPRK specifies: “[in] recent years, Sweden... sought to contribute to increased transparency and the progressive integration of North Korea into the international community” (Swedish Embassy in Pyongyang, 2012).

Interviewees neatly sum these up by saying Sweden has functioned as a “facilitator,” a role strongly advocated and pursued under the Persson administration (Interviewees #1, #3, and #5). Being a facilitator is different from being a mediator who takes an active part in shaping a consensus or resolving a conflict as a third party. Sweden does not see the need to sit in on the Six-Party Talk (but encourages those directly involved in resuming the process) or offer to mediate, as the Swiss did, in the latest tension in the Korean Peninsula after the third nuclear test (Interviewee #1; Thomasson, 2013). Instead, the country strives to be available should the DPRK government consider gradual political and economic liberalization in the future (Interviewee #5). This facilitator-mindset justifies continuing to host capacity building programs, aimed mainly at “exposing” North Koreans to Western thinking and the outside world for their reflective, comparative learning; ensuring the full attainment of lecture subjects is a secondary concern (Interviewees #2 and #4).

## **Unpacking Motivations for Swedish Engagement**

While Sweden may have set its engagement ambition as low-risk by being a facilitator, it is still a difficult choice to remain engaged in a country whose military provocation and domestic livelihood and human rights concerns can potentially tarnish the image of the engaging state in the international community. What has motivated Sweden?

Few interviewed actors argue that Sweden’s engagement is a rational choice and conducive to its national interest. For a small state like Sweden, engagement, not isolation, is a realistic strategy to assert its foreign policy influence in the world (Interviewees #2 and #5). Other engaging states have sought Sweden for its knowledge of the country and networks with government officials (Interviewee #2). In the long-term, maintaining these unique ties can help Swedish business and other non-governmental actors achieve their own goals in the DPRK; as if to remind others of this, the NIR website states that its organizational long-term vision to help politically

complex countries improve their structural conditions is “to make it easier for Swedish and domestic companies to be active there” (NIR, 2013).

A less explored realm of rationalizing engagement is how individuals involved in Swedish engagement programs make sense of their work, albeit seemingly invisible and slow impact. Those who had witnessed the North Koreans receiving training commonly spoke of rewarding moments, such as, when they showed increased understanding of taught subjects, were eager to learn more, and – even if rarely – were honest about what can be done better in their own country in reflection to what they had seen in other countries (Interviewees #2 and #5). Such moments are viewed as the potential of engagement via exposure in leaving indelible impressions in the minds of North Korean elites. Furthermore, the DPRK lacks so much knowledge and skill sets that the demand for such training in the future can only grow (Interviewee #1). Without this gratification at an individual level, operationalizing Sweden’s engagement scheme would have not been sustainable.

Nonetheless, aforementioned rational gains are not always foreseeable. One interviewee states that it has not always been clear what Sweden wanted from its relations with the DPRK, which resulted in changing roles within the Korean Peninsula over time (Interviewee #3). The logic of convenience seems to be another source of motivation. In the beginning, establishing contacts and organizing training were very difficult. Despite the steep learning curve, once the engagement activities were set in place, repeating those has been easier (Interviewee #5).

Based on insiders’ accounts, it is tempting to conclude that Sweden’s engagement is driven by self-serving motives. However, in today’s world politics a state cannot single-handedly pursue and achieve its foreign policy interests without affecting and being affected by other country stakeholders and supranational communities. As mentioned earlier, Sweden’s attempt to disengage was thwarted in the mid-1990s as it took on the role of protecting power; even when imagining future scenarios of disengagement, the same constraint applies (Interviewees #1, #3, and #6). EU membership has come with certain conditions. After the DPRK’s third nuclear test, Swedish actors were asked to keep their engagement activities low-profile in order to send a clear, publicly unified EU message of disapproval of the country’s action (Interview #1; Interview #3).

As such, Sweden’s engagement has been sustained with the external demands placed on it. By meeting these expectations, Sweden and its unique leverage on the DPRK are perceived as “appropriate” by other states and the

international community (March and Olsen, 2004). Unless domestic opposition to the current Swedish engagement with the DPRK outweighs the benefits of appropriateness, disengagement is unlikely in the near future.

### **Adaptability as Catalyst**

One can raise a question that aforementioned endogenous and exogenous motivations for engagement also exist in other engaging states such as China, the ROK, and the U.S.<sup>18</sup> Yet no other state has been as adaptable and self-transforming while maintaining the overall framework of engagement. In the past four decades, Sweden began its relations as a potential trade partner, then became a major aid donor, expanded its role as a dialogue broker, and is now serving as one of the few remaining channels for the international community to communicate with the DPRK government.

At an individual level, Swedish actors have learned to work with the North Koreans over time. Designing and operating training programs still involve a wide range of challenges such as the inability to ensure the attendance of the North Korean participants until the last minute and their general lack of base knowledge to be able to make sense of taught subjects (Interviewees #2 and #4). Gradually, these challenges were expected and understood as part of the deal in view of the DPRK's internal and external sensitivities around exposing its elites to the Western world and ways of thinking.

Such a flexible learning curve at the individual level would not survive if it had to deal with inflexible bureaucracy or media publicity in Sweden (Interviewees #2 and #5). Distancing the DPRK agenda from public scrutiny is a learned strategy. Consider Sweden's criticism against U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War. Once the Swedish Social Democrats publicly made their critical stance, they felt urged to employ stronger anti-U.S. rhetoric in order to mirror anti-U.S. public sentiment at that time; they also wanted to not lose its young voters to contending parties that were enticing them with more radical rhetoric (Scott, 2009: 244). In this respect, Swedish policy makers understand the cost of turning engagement with the DPRK into a domestic issue for open discussion. The DPRK is a low priority in Sweden's overall foreign policy, which also helps to avoid constant attention.

Such an engagement profile is not easily applied to other states that have greater and more clearly-defined strategic interests in the DPRK. Conditions

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<sup>18</sup> In the 2000s, the U.S. and the ROK shifted from pro-engagement bilateral approaches to multilateral approaches that prioritize denuclearization. As a result, the two countries have lost channels for direct communication and private exchanges, and have been phrased as enemies in the DPRK government's propaganda to its population and the world. Read Chanlett-Avery & Rinehart (2013) for U.S.-DPRK relations and Foster-Carter (2013) for Inter-Korean relations.

such as higher vulnerability to the DPRK's security threats, a closer distance between the policy-making and the public opinion on the Peninsula issues, and the politicization on engaging the DPRK are also unfavorable for replicating the Sweden's experience (Helgesen in Bae, 2011).

## Current Status and Prospect

Sweden's engagement with the DPRK is likely to continue with no prospect of expanding or deepening its activities. Governing for two terms since 2006 until now, the Swedish conservative alliance (called *Alliansen*, formerly *Allians för Sverige*) has been consolidating its own foreign policy legacies in a different way to the policy of Social Democratic years. The image of Sweden as an independent opinion-maker and global activist is fading.<sup>19</sup> Sweden is a closer ally to the U.S. and acts in greater conformity to the EU (and thus to foreign policies of major European powers such as France, Germany, and the UK). Sweden pays less regional attention to Asia except China, a major trading partner (Interviewees #2 and #3). Meanwhile, since the establishment of the EU-DPRK diplomatic relation in 2001, other EU countries have established their own embassies in Pyongyang with more staff and resources than Sweden's and are operating their own capacity building programs; Sweden's comparative advantage is therefore decreased (Interviewee #6). The latest nuclear testing and continued military provocations by the DPRK reversed the momentum to consider further engaging with the DPRK. The international community has come together to condemn such actions and strengthened economic sanctions against the country. Swedish training programs have been put on hold indefinitely as of June 2013 (Interviewees #2, #5, and #6).<sup>20</sup>

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

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<sup>19</sup> Swedish politicians across parties agree that Sweden's ability to win broad support in the UN has weakened (Eriksson, 2013).

<sup>20</sup> An interviewee says that when the second nuclear test occurred in 2006, Sweden suspended its training programs for the DPRK for a year.

between the DPRK and the outside world, but with much less visible activism than in the early 2000s.

## **Theoretical Reflection**

Sweden's engagement with the DPRK is a unique case in which motivations cannot be fully explored from the realist approach alone. The constructivist perspective complements this gap by adding the logic of convenience and appropriateness. We also unpacked the scene of Sweden's self-serving nature to the individual level and revealed how individual actors sought meanings and values in their work.

Our case study adds value by jointly employing Resnick's engagement and Call's interpretation of fragility. Independently, each concept exhibits strengths as well as areas for update. Resnick's engagement fits with our case because it emphasizes the dialectic nature of engagement. Nevertheless, it needs to include actors other than the engager and the target since contemporary issues calling for external engagement are regional or international in scale and/or impact. Call's analytical insight on fragility proves to be useful in identifying contextualized symptoms and corresponding responses. However, because his concept is based on states embroiled in internal conflict, it does not neatly explain the security dilemma of the DPRK and its human security repercussions. Interestingly, both concepts turn out to be mutually complementary. Considering that the present trend in international engagement is increasingly multilateral and norm-driven, we believe both concepts can be employed to account for other cases of engagement.

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