

Article

# Nordic Representations of North Korea: A Study of Newspaper Sources

Erik MOBRAND & Kristoffer TINGBACKE

## Introduction

The first half of 2018 produced hope that one of East Asia's most difficult security issues—the unresolved Korean conflict—was heading toward progress. Besides the historic meeting between North Korean leader Kim Jong Un and his South Korean counterpart Moon Jae-in, Washington softened its tone on Pyongyang, albeit unevenly. Such shifts underpinned the summit between Kim and United States president Donald Trump. Given the inflammatory language frequently used by both the American and North Korean governments to describe the other, as well as apparently-distinct understandings of “de-nuclearization,” there was good reason for skepticism that a single meeting would produce a breakthrough and a sustained shift in Pyongyang-Washington relations. Many have hoped that the historic opportunity for change on the peninsula would not be wasted. Stuttering progress now permits cautious optimism amid uncertainty.

In this mix, northern European countries stepped in to help find ways to facilitate dialogue between North Korea and outside powers. In late January, 2018, North Korea's deputy foreign minister, Han Sang-Ryol, traveled to Stockholm, where he met with the Swedish prime minister and foreign minister. The main agenda was to discuss the possibility of Sweden, given its diplomatic presence in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), offering protection for potential American, Australian, and Canadian missions in Pyongyang (*Expressen* 2018). On 19 February 2018, the foreign ministers of Sweden and South Korea met on the sidelines of the Pyeongchang Winter Games to discuss inter-Korean affairs. Swedish Foreign Minister Margot Wallström expressed her strong support for South Korea's efforts to engage North Korea in dialogue (*Yonhap News* 2018). Mediation offered by the Swedish government falls within a longer history of Nordic engagement with both sides of the Korean peninsula. Understanding Nordic perspectives on North Korea could be useful for establishing the groundwork for clear

---

\* The authors would like to thank Geir Helgesen, Myungkoo Kang, and Sung Hae Kim, as well as participants in the February 2018 workshop on “Crisis on the Korean Peninsula and the ‘Demonizing’ Discourse on North Korea,” for their valuable comments on our work. The research on which this article is based emerged from collaboration between the Seoul National University Asia Center (SNUAC) and the Nordic Institute of Asian Studies. We are grateful for funding provided to the SNUAC from the Institute for Peace and Unification Studies at Seoul National University.

consideration of options for peace and security on the Korean peninsula. In particular, leadership from an outside region such as Scandinavia—or Southeast Asia—may be crucial for ensuring that the most is made of initial progress in relations between North Korea, South Korea, and the United States in the thaw of 2018.

The attitude of the Nordic governments to North Korea stands in contrast to dominant representations of the DPRK. Media organizations in the Anglophone world, as well as in South Korea and Japan, produce and propagate an image of the country as an almost unreal, “abnormal” place. In this image, which might be called a “demonizing” frame, the country appears beyond understanding with a leadership that is, at turns, ridiculous, immature, incapable, evil, and self-serving. American President George W. Bush’s labelling in 2002 of North Korea as a member of an “axis of evil” crystalized this view. Popular culture portrayals have only amplified the “axis of evil” perspective. Presenting North Korea as an aberration in a world of “normal” states, this frame dismisses engagement with Pyeongyang. This way of representing North Korea thus has a political function: the strength and pervasiveness of this frame makes such a refusal to engage appear sensible in public. It serves the long-standing preference in Washington, DC for threats and sanctions rather than dialogue and diplomacy.

Given that Nordic governments appear less keen on isolating North Korea, it may be that a greater diversity of representations of North Korea can be found in that region. While the dominant frame for discussing North Korea has penetrated most corners of the globe, through entertainment if not through news reporting, the Nordic region’s own connections with North Korea could provide the basis for alternative images. States in the Nordic region, comprising Sweden, Denmark, and Norway, have historically had to manage carefully their external relationships in order to negotiate safely between far larger players in geopolitics. They have at times assumed roles as brokers in international conflicts. Nordic governments also have maintained diplomatic relations with Pyeongyang for over four decades. As smaller countries—and in Sweden’s case, neutral—the Nordic states have fashioned positions for themselves in inter-Korean relations and in linking the DPRK to other countries. Does the Nordic-North Korea relationship contribute to a discourse on North Korea that diverges from the Anglophone demonization paradigm?

We examine the sources used in Nordic newspaper reports on North

Korea in order to investigate this question. The use of sources has been identified as an important issue in representations of North Korea (Gusterson 2008; Jeong and Kim 2017). Many reporters in the United States cite anonymous government sources, select only those experts with a particular background, or avoid those with alternative views. Such an approach to sources compounds the blurring of facts and interpretations, and it creates fertile ground for demonization of the country. Long histories of ties with North Korea means that the Nordic countries are home to individuals with particular, direct experiences with the DPRK. Many are or have been involved in quiet negotiations rather than public confrontations. Insofar as Nordic reporters turn to these individuals when preparing stories, more nuanced images of North Korea may appear and there may be space to move beyond the internationally dominant frame on the country. Such sources might provide a link between regional ties and representations of North Korea.

Our argument is that the history of ties with North Korea does have an impact on media representations of the country. We show that the newspapers draw on Nordic sources with experience and/or expertise in dealing with North Korea. Since many of these sources refrain from demonizing North Korea, articles paint a more nuanced picture of the country than is found in typical Anglophone media representations. To be sure, the demonizing frame remains present in Nordic newspapers, but reporters turn regularly to local sources who challenge, directly or indirectly, that frame. Among the Nordic sources, we find varying perspectives. This variation can be attributed to proximity to the US-led international order: in general, those actors who are more independent of that order are the ones who depart from demonizing views of North Korea. Such actors include think tank officials charged with North Korea related work, individuals involved in activities in North Korea, and Swedish government representatives more than Norwegian or Danish. These sources do not necessarily offer a more positive view of the DPRK, but their portrayal is more human and empathetic. A caveat should be noted that the number of individuals cited as sources is small, so personal biases make any conclusion about causes of the observed trend tentative. Even as Nordic actors criticize North Korean weapons development and the human rights record, they refuse to interpret the country through a simplistic lens of good and evil. The Nordic material indicates that one can be concerned about human rights without making indignity over violations cause for disengagement. Since

powerful parties to Korean tensions have long been hesitant to open their minds to dialogue, this lesson is useful for thinking about ways to build support for peaceful solutions on the Korean peninsula.

## **International Media Representations of North Korea**

When the security situation on the Korean peninsula became alarming to many in the mid-1990s, one might have expected the international community to respond by working to form a detailed picture of the forces apparently driving the leadership toward development of nuclear weapons. A rational response would be to gain as much information and understanding as possible so as to best weigh policy alternatives against each other. To the contrary, US-led discourse on North Korea presented a deliberately distorted caricature of the regime. The unfamiliar style of authority became something to mock as abnormal. George W. Bush's labelling of the DPRK as a member of the "axis of evil" finalized the demonization of the regime in the public imaginary. Since then, reporting on the country has been made blurry by a refusal to discuss it without recourse to emotional judgments of the regime. Even as missile and nuclear tests have occurred, the United States and major media organizations have resorted to simplistic and moralistic portrayals of the country. This blurry reporting does little to serve clear policymaking and is even dangerous given what is at stake on the Korean peninsula.

A key aspect of the media's demonization of North Korea has been to treat it as a place removed from the real or "normal" world of societies. North Korea is even said to be viewed as a work of fiction rather than an actual place (Choi 2015). This view means that metaphors are rampant in portrayals of the country. A study of Australian media reports on North Korea identifies:

[a] distinct group of metaphors that underlie the Australian media's orientation to North Korea. Based on the frequency of certain key words, the dominant metaphors identified include "North Korea as a military threat" (conflict metaphor); "North Korea as unpredictable, irrational and ruthless" (psychopathology metaphor); "North Korea as isolated and secretive" (pariah metaphor); "North Korea as cruel dystopia" (Orwellian metaphor); and "North Korea as impoverished" (basket case metaphor).

(Dalton et al. 2016, 524)

These metaphors then inform framing of North Korea. Similarly, as West (2017) points out, North Korea is routinely imagined by reference to something else instead of on its own terms. The “axis of evil” label associates the country with a set of countries charged with seeking to undermine American and, by implication, global safety. North Korea is thus “like” Iraq or Iran. In the most orientalist fashion, North Korea can never be understood on its own terms. In this way, “North Korea emerges as a knowable entity through the interactions between the media and its audience’s interpretation and subsequent perspectives” (West 2017, 594). As with the discourse of the “war on terror,” representations of North Korea dehumanize the country (Steuter and Wills 2009).

Such media framing of North Korea leads to criticism of everything in the country. A study of Western representations of North Korea in the 2012 Olympic Games finds that reporting was routinely dismissive and negative (Yoon and Wilson 2016). Such a negative view leads to hostile representations of the country in international affairs. Headlines from Australia show a “clear pattern whereby North Korea was both sensationalized and demonised as evil, maniacal, unpredictable and a threat to Australia and the world at large” (Dalton et al. 2016, 529). This demonization means that North Korea takes the blame for all disputes involving the country. In reporting on the nuclear tensions involving the country, “dominant media focus on the narcissism and blackmail frames” (Gusterson 2008, 34). North Korea is portrayed as the only country that could possibly be at fault, while the United States and other parties are presented as victims of the simultaneously conniving and blundering North Korean leadership.

While reporting from much of the English-speaking world follows these patterns, it appears strongest in the United States. Dai and Hyun (2010, 309-13), in a comparison of Associated Press (AP), Xinhua, and Yonhap coverage of the 2006 DPRK nuclear test, finds that “inflammatory language” was used most by the AP. Of six terms implying a moral evaluation, AP had a high proportion of articles mentioning four of them. Xinhua and Yonhap used more peace-friendly frames when describing North Korea. British media representations of North Korea may be similar to American ones. James Hoare (2016) observes that the “main emphasis in British coverage of North Korea is on the odd and the peculiar,” such as Kim Jong Un’s hairstyle. Media present “what is routine as something special, out of the ordinary—in a word, bizarre.” North Korea is

exotic, an object of fascination or ridicule, and not home to people with which one might empathize.

Following other scholarship (e.g., Kim and Kim 2017, 9-15), we refer to these portrayals of North Korea as “demonizing” (*angmahwa*). In a demonized representation, a regime that may be rightly criticized is recreated as an image. We can distinguish representations that demonize North Korea from those that present it in a more human, empathetic manner. The former can be found in reporting that begins with a judgment having already been made, and interprets any evidence through the lens of that judgment. These categories are useful apart entirely from any questions of whether criticisms of North Korea are valid. Indeed, as shall be seen, many Nordic actors are highly critical of weapons programs and humanitarian conditions in North Korea, and yet they do not espouse a demonizing view.

A factor facilitating demonization is that few people in Western countries have direct contact with North Korea. Without links through travel, study, or trade, there is a weak material basis for building empathy. The unknown can be more easily demonized than a society with which one can identify. Another factor is the use of sources in news reports (Seo 2009). Gusterson (2008, 33) points out that an alarming proportion of sources in US reports come from anonymous state department representatives and conservative think tanks. Journalists avoid many specialists for comment and they do not seek alternative viewpoints. Gusterson finds the sources problems so great that his primary recommendations for fighting the demonization of North Korea relate to sources. His first recommendation is to end the practice of quoting US government officials anonymously (Gusterson 2008, 36-37). His second is to get quotations from a wider range of sources; the third, to seek sources from a wider range of countries. Sources are important because they directly influence how the issue is interpreted. Selecting unreliable sources or only particular opinions creates misinformation and blurs fact and opinion. As a result, “much of the coverage has been repetitive, unimaginative, narrowly sourced, ideological, and, at its worst, baldly inaccurate” (Gusterson 2008, 22).

Most studies of media representations have focused on English-language media. We do not have a good sense for whether this problem extends beyond these jurisdictions. Alternative imaginings of North Korea may exist in reporting in other languages. Examining the limits of the demonization paradigm may be instructive for thinking about how to overcome or diminish the salience of that

frame. Fresh ways of imagining North Korea may help in the search for new, constructive ways of acting towa

## The Nordics and North Korea

There are two reasons to think that the Nordic region may be a source of more complex views on North Korea. The first reason concerns the region's relationship with the Korean peninsula. The Nordic countries had relationships with Korea before separate regimes were established on the peninsula. As Soviet-American tensions built up over what to do with Korea, the Nordic countries walked a careful line. While they supported the United Nations effort in Korea, none of the countries lent military forces to the Korean War. Instead, they gave medical assistance to the Republic of Korea. After 1953, the countries did not immediately recognize South Korea. Instead, it took until 1959 to establish diplomatic relations with the country. This delay stemmed from the region's need to be careful in global geopolitics (Saxer 2017).

Since then, the region has developed relationships with both Koreas. All countries now hold diplomatic relations with North Korea. The Nordic countries established diplomatic relations with the DPRK in the early 1970s. Sweden maintains an ambassador's residence in Pyongyang, while Denmark and Norway each have a joint ambassador for the South and North. Sweden, in particular, has as a neutral nation played a role linking North Korea to the outside (see Lamm 2012). The Swedish government engages in human rights advocacy in North Korea quietly, for example by creating channels for dialogue for scholars and officials, and has aid projects there. Sweden is thus "best viewed as a facilitator between DPRK and the outside world" (Andersson and Bae 2015, 42). Other Nordic-North Korean ties include the national football coach being a Norwegian. There are therefore diplomats, researchers, and other citizens with experience dealing with North Korea. This background means reporters can turn to sources who have direct experience engaging North Korea. Indeed, the Swedish ambassador to the DPRK has stressed that part of his mandate is to provide accurate information on North Korea: "There are many nuances to news reporting on North Korea, our mission is to relay more accurate information about North Korea and the situation back to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Swedish Government" (*Aftenposten*, 27 July 2015).



Given these connections, the demonizing paradigm might thus be diminished in Nordic representations.

The second reason relates to the broader relationship between the Nordics and the world order. The demonizing frame is as much about defining what is “normal” as it is about North Korea. It is thus most attractive to those closer to the center of global power. In international affairs, while the Nordic countries are not removed from international alliances, they are widely seen as small countries that can be trusted for mediating disputes. The Nordic countries themselves have also had to negotiate between larger powers in the past.

For these reasons, it may be expected that the demonizing frame resonates less in the Nordic countries. North Korea may be more real to more influential people in these countries. As reporters seek comments on the country, they may turn to this wider body of knowledgeable individuals.

## Questions and Method

In this paper, we investigate the following questions: What sources do Nordic media use in reporting on North Korea? In particular, to what extent do they draw on local (Nordic-based) expertise versus other international sources? Do these sources mitigate or contribute to the presentation of North Korea as an incomprehensible “other”?

We pursue these questions through an examination of newspapers. We chose the online versions of a national newspaper from each of Denmark, Norway, and Sweden. These dailies are, respectively, *Jyllands-Posten*, *Aftenposten*, and *Dagens Nyheter*. These are among the most respected papers in the countries. The online versions gain wide exposure and, compared with some other popular online newspapers, these are perceived as more established or reputable. We also avoided overlapping ownership of outlets: for this reason, the Swedish paper *Dagens Nyheter* was selected over *Aftonbladet* despite the latter constituting the most widely circulated paper offline as well as online, since *Aftonbladet* is, together with *Aftenposten*, owned by Norway’s Schibsted Media Group. The papers in this selection mostly reflect a mainstream liberal perspective. While a fuller account would include smaller papers with distinct editorial positions, the view espoused in the ones we have chosen is seen in many of the larger papers.

For each newspaper, we took 20 to 30 original articles from the period 2015-2017 that deal directly with North Korean affairs. We selected this period in order to ensure relatively recent coverage and a large enough sample where patterns would emerge. Moreover, this period is one of tense inter-Korean relations and includes three North Korean nuclear weapons tests as well as missile tests. While media coverage from, say, the early 2000s might be expected to include relatively positive perspectives, in the period selected here, the security situation on the peninsula gave little ground for optimism. We included only articles of more than 300 words and we excluded opinion pieces. The pieces we included are, therefore, longer reports related to North Korea. We aimed to collect articles relating to a diversity of subjects. At the same time, the articles chosen nearly exhaust the set of articles matching our other criteria. For each article, we identified all sources cited. We then coded these sources according to whether they are Nordic-based or not, as well as the type of sources they are.

The articles we selected include only original articles from the Scandinavian newspapers. We excluded syndicated articles. However, it should be noted that each of the newspapers has many articles on North Korea syndicated and translated from international media sources such as CNN or the BBC. A reader of the Scandinavian press will be exposed regularly to the global, Anglophone media discourse on North Korea and, therefore, to the demonizing frame.

Furthermore, even where Nordic sources are used, articles are informed by non-Nordic ones cited directly or indirectly. References to international media outlets, including South Korea’s Yonhap News Agency, are common. Anonymous government sources in the United States and in South Korea enter the articles through reference to international media reports.

**Table 1. Articles with Nordic Sources**

Newspaper	Articles	Articles Citing a Nordic Source	Distinct Nordic Sources
<i>Jyllands-Posten</i> (Denmark)	30	6 (20%)	4
<i>Aftenposten</i> (Norway)	20	8 (40%)	13
<i>Dagens Nyheter</i> (Sweden)	21	10 (52%)	14
Average/Total	71	24 (34%)	29

In the Nordic articles, a mix of international and Nordic sources are found. About 34 percent of the articles use at least one Nordic source. The figure is higher for the Swedish paper, with ten of 21 articles citing a Nordic source, and the Norwegian paper (eight of 20) than the Danish (six of 30). There are interviews with experts based elsewhere and use of sources from international organizations, and a few articles drawing on interviews with North Koreans as well as Chinese living on the North Korean border.

## **Types of Nordic Sources on North Korea**

The Nordic sources include diplomats, academics, think tank staff, civil society activists, as well as a few non-experts who have happened to come into contact with the country. A total of 29 different Nordic sources were cited in the set of articles.

An important point is that the articles do not rely substantially on anonymous sources. Through indirect reference, there is mention of anonymous government sources in the United States and Republic of Korea (ROK) governments. In some references from the international media, there is a tendency to point toward unclear sources. In several cases, citations of South Korean news agency Yonhap or South Korean government offices lead to articles that are built on anonymous sources. There is less vagueness in the Nordic sources. No anonymous Nordic source is cited in this collection of articles. The issue noted by Gusterson (2008) and Jeong and Kim (2017) of anonymous government sources is thus largely avoided. Relative to foreign media sources, the Nordic sources can be clearly linked to experience with or expert information on North Korea.

Governmental actors include politicians and ministers, as well as diplomats and a military representative. When reporters turned to government sources, they went directly to the highest levels. There are no references to officials ranked below ambassador. Compared with reporting in the United States or South Korea, where citing other government representatives is common, the Nordic newspapers only rely on high-level government sources. The officials cited also have direct experience with the Korean peninsula. There is little that is secretive, anonymous, or vague in this reporting.

Research institutes and universities, which are not clearly distinguished since universities often host institutes, comprise another set of sources. Among the researchers who are cited, several are involved in direct relationships with North Koreans. Staff from the Institute for Security and Development Policy (ISDP), for example, are cited in the Swedish press. The Stockholm-based organization has regular visitors from the Korean peninsula and serves as a place where both South and North Koreans can visit. A diplomat who led the establishment of Sweden’s embassy in Pyongyang, Erik Cornell, has also been connected with ISDP. Experience with these exchanges could be the basis for a unique perspective far removed from the demonizing paradigm. The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) has also hosted meetings between US and North Korean officials. In Copenhagen, the Director of the Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, Geir Helgesen, is a sociologist of Korea who lived for a spell in Pyongyang. He is interviewed in the Danish press regularly, and also in the newspapers from his native Norway. These figures can speak on the basis of direct experience of North Korean affairs.

**Table 2. Nordic Sources**

Type of Source by Institutional Affiliation	Examples of Positions/Institutions
Government	prime minister (Denmark); foreign minister (Norway, Sweden); ambassador (Norway, Sweden); NATO General Secretary (Norway); a colonel in the military (Sweden)
Institute/Think Tank	Norwegian Institute of International Affairs; Nordic Institute of Asian Studies; Swedish Defense Research Institute; Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (Sweden); Institute for Security and Development Policy (Sweden)
University	Peace Research Institute Oslo (Norway); Norwegian Defence Command and Staff College; Stockholm University (Sweden)
Civil Society	Mission East (Denmark); Amnesty International (Norway); Civita (Norway); Swedish Friendship Association with DPRK; Amnesty Sweden
Non-expert	magician and author (Denmark); DPRK football coach (Norway); artist (Norway)
Business	Korea Konsult (Sweden)
Media	Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs Press Service

**Table 3. Institutional Affiliation of Nordic Sources by Newspaper**

	<i>Jyllands-Posten</i> (Denmark)	<i>Aftenposten</i> (Norway)	<i>Dagens Nyheter</i> (Sweden)	Total
Government	1	4	3	7
Institute/Think Tank	1	3	4	7
University	0	2	2	4
Civil Society	1	3	2	6
Non-expert	1	1	1	3
Business	0	0	1	1
Media	0	0	1	1

The civil society sources include representatives of local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and local officers serving in international NGOs. A small number of local NGOs operate in North Korea. An example is Denmark-based Mission East, which runs disaster relief projects in the country. Among international NGOs, representatives of Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch feature in the articles.

There are a few independent individuals who are cited as well. These are figures who through their own activities have spent time in North Korea. They are not policy experts but can report on what they have seen and experienced. They include the Norwegian coach of the North Korean national football squad and a Danish magician who toured the DPRK. It is striking that very few figures from the media or business (one each) appear among the sources.

These sources may represent the range of available expertise or the preferences of the journalists. We cannot determine which in this analysis. It is likely, though, to be partly the former. The distribution of expertise on Korean affairs in the Nordics is skewed toward the government and research institutes. There are also other Nordic experts in Korean affairs outside the region. Prominent examples include the Swedish journalist Bertil Lintner and Danish academic Carl Saxer. In our particular set of articles, these figures do not feature.

There is variation across the newspapers in the types of sources cited. The greatest diversity can be seen in Sweden's *Dagens Nyheter*. Sweden has several institute researchers who have direct experience with North Korea, but it also has civil society links with North Korea and some independent observers. The Danish *Jyllands-Posten* shows the least diversity in types of sources.

Overall, then, while the newspapers have not drawn on a huge pool of experts, they have made use of the sorts of sources that are locally available. The sources can be said to draw on the Nordic region's particular relationships with North Korea. The foreign ministry representatives, think tank officers, and NGO workers all come from this relationship. Many of these are people who can also claim some degree of experience in Korean affairs. They may lack Korean language facility, but they are versed in specific dimensions of North Korean matters or draw on direct experience. The views of a few individuals can, of course, color the perspectives that gain representation, and there is no claim here that newspaper reports are free from the biases of their sources. Rather, it is the willingness of Nordic newspapers to cite experienced sources by name that should be stressed. The contrast with US, UK, or Australian media is great. Since the failure to build articles on reliable, identified sources with direct North Korea experience is understood as a major cause of demonization, we can expect that there should be a wider range of perspectives presented in the Nordic papers.

## Perspectives from the Nordic Sources

From the quotations in the newspapers, we can see that some Nordic sources endorse the demonizing paradigm while others do not. This variety is a key finding in our analysis. Proximity to North Korean affairs does not guarantee that a source articulates a nuanced view. Ambassadors with direct experience dealing with DPRK officials can also express frustration and echo demonizing sentiments. However, most specialist sources either directly criticized mainstream portrayals of North Korea or offered more complicated pictures. Helgesen is one critic of the demonization paradigm. Another is the director of Norway's Peace Research Institute, Professor Stein Tønnesson, who points to the flaw in the thinking of those who oppose engagement with North Korea: "Should you always avoid becoming a part of something, then going to North Korea would be wrong as well. Then it would be wrong to provide food to those that starve in the country, because you are not supposed to help when it is the regime's fault that the people starve—right?" (*Aftenposten*, 12 May 2016). In comments to the media, researchers with Sweden's ISDP and SIPRI reference the North Korean regime's culpability in connection with human rights abuses

as well as the problems created for international security. However, they present these as problems to engage rather than simply expressing dismay over them. Non-specialists with North Korea experience also point to ways that the country is less strange than it is made out to be. The Norwegian artist Morten Traavik, who has cooperated with DPRK artists, says that “North Korea is more open to the outside world than what the current media image reveals” (*Dagens Nyheter*, 18 August 2015).

In statements related to humanitarian concerns, the sources reflect an especially sharp divide in views on North Korea. In global reporting on North Korea, the invocation of human rights is frequently followed by condemnation of the regime and refusal to engage. In other words, the human rights discourse can feed into demonization. American and South Korean humanitarianism tends to be infused with evangelic overtones. Such a framework interprets the world in Manichean categories of good and evil, clearly resonating with demonization. Nordic humanitarianism, by contrast, has less of that fervor. The approach is more clinical than religious. The answer to dire human rights conditions is not to disengage and condemn, but to develop aid projects and talk. This divergence is reflected in the newspaper sources. The international human rights groups condemn North Korea in far stronger terms than local groups. An Amnesty International representative in Norway stated that working with North Korea implied “legitimizing one of the most locked regimes in the world” (*Aftenposten*, 12 May 2016). An Amnesty officer in Sweden articulated a similar view, as did a Sweden-based representative of Human Rights Watch (*Dagens Nyheter*, 17 December 2016). Local NGOs, on the other hand, argue that in the name of human rights it is better to engage ordinary people and leave politics up to others. These NGOs, which operate in North Korea, have an interest in regular Koreans and they are better able to distinguish the regime from the population. Articles that cite such sources remind the reader that North Korea is another country with people who are understandable. This view is distinct from the demonizing frame. The language of human rights can thus either be used to uphold the dominant paradigm or to build empathy. A crucial lesson here, one generally not found in South Korean and Anglophone discussions, is that human rights need not be a proxy for demonization; alternative ways of framing North Korea can be built from a humanitarian standpoint. In South Korea in particular, this position is politically a difficult one to articulate, as mention of human rights is equated with taking a critical

view of engagement with the Pyongyang regime.

Debates appear between those with different perspectives on North Korea. A good example is the response to the appointment in 2016 of Norwegian Jørn Andersen as the DPRK's national football coach. While Andersen explained his appointment by noting that sport can foster dialogue, cooperation, and peace, the same article referenced those who see North Korea as an enemy that should not be engaged (*Aftenposten*, 10 August 2016). Civil society activist Bård Larsen reacted to the news of the appointment of his fellow countryman becoming national coach for North Korea by stating, "This is a totalitarian regime. He is aiding the NK-regime's propaganda machine and is paid directly by the regime. This is dirty money" (*Aftenposten*, 12 May 2016). What the Nordic sources offer, then, is a variety of perspectives. While some fall in line with the demonization paradigm, others represent neutral or empathic views. This variety sets these newspapers apart from the tendency in much English-language reporting to use sources who lack direct North Korean experience and to cite only those sources who reinforce common views.

## **The International Order and Framing**

The observation of varying views on North Korea among the Nordic sources raises the question of why some sources demonize the country and others do not. The relationship between sources and the demonizing paradigm is better captured by examining how sources are tied to global political networks. The demonization of North Korea is intimately tied to the global power structure, as a way for the United States, in particular, to identify an enemy (Kim and Kim 2017). Constructivist thinking in international relations points to the ways that identity-construction underpins foreign policy. In this view, development of norms, creation of self and "other" categories, and definition of interests precede any calculation of how one state behaves toward another (Wendt 1992). The demonization of North Korea may be seen as an act of self-definition on the part of the United States: it is an effort to steer the ends of foreign policy. Those states that are close with Washington may assimilate this intersubjective understanding and invoke a similar frame for North Korea. If we think of media representations from this perspective, then the demonization of North Korea is hardly random but tied to actors' positions in the international order.



Placing the Nordic actors in the international order is a promising starting point for identifying relationships to the demonizing frame.

All three Nordic countries were careful not to join the Korean War as military participants and chose instead to dispatch medical resources to assist the south. The question of the ROK's official status was handled delicately as well throughout the 1950s until all three countries recognized the ROK in 1959 (Saxer 2017). There are also prominent differences among the Scandinavian countries. Sweden's relationship to the DPRK is substantively different from both that of Norway or Denmark, which is evident in the fact that Sweden is the only country of the three that retains a foreign mission or embassy in the DPRK. Both Denmark and Norway have been members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) where Sweden has not. Sweden is part of the Neutral Nations Supervisory Commission (NNSC) established in 1953 by the Korean Armistice Agreement. Closeness to the United States or a country's relative integration into the US global military and security structure may also impact how local experts view and present the DPRK.

Based on its neutrality, Sweden has been involved in numerous, often quiet, exchanges with the DPRK. Think tanks and university institutes host North Korean scholars and officials as guests and workshop participants, while Swedish representatives make trips to North Korea as well (Andersson and Bae 2015, 49-51). Such exchanges provide for a wider set of expertise and for a subtler relationship, though one that is largely out of the public eye in Sweden. The country has more experts on a variety of range of North Korean matters. The DPRK is also one of Sweden's main recipients of foreign development assistance, topping the ranks in 2011 (Andersson and Bae 2015, 48-49).

Sources closer to the United States do indeed represent North Korea in ways more similar to dominant global frames. An example comes from the comments of NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, a Norwegian politician who was twice prime minister of his country. Stoltenberg's position puts him at the core of the US-led international order. He has expressed views that are critical of negotiation with Pyeongyang. He called for more sanctions, labelling the regime "provocative and reckless" (*Aftenposten*, 7 February 2016). Sources further from these centers tend to stray from the demonizing frame, sometimes criticizing it directly. Some actors explain their North Korea activities in terms of a Nordic commitment to peace and mediation rather than war. Julia Dalard, CEO of Korea Konsult AB, for example, draws on notions of neutrality

espoused by Sweden in order to articulate her role in conducting business in North Korea. Jørn Andersen, the Norwegian DPRK national football team manager, emphasizes the unifying influence of football and Norway's position as a potential mediator in international conflicts.

Representatives of the Norwegian and Danish states, more so than the Swedish, embrace the demonizing paradigm. The then-Foreign Minister Børge Brende of Norway, who served from 2013 to 2017, blamed North Korea for causing insecurity in the world (*Aftenposten*, 9 September 2016). Sweden's ambassador to the DPRK, Torkel Stiernlöf, takes a different position. He maintains that:

Regarding human rights issues the distance between us can be relatively great. Then it is important to find a suitable tone of dialogue from which the counterpart does not cease to listen, but hopefully accepts comments and constructive criticism. A foundational principle for Swedish foreign policy is not to close the door for the simple reason you have differing opinions. (*Aftenposten*, 27 July 2015)

In this position, differences are not viewed as grounds for ending discussion. While representatives of the Swedish government maintain the official line of condemning North Korea's missile and nuclear tests, they often also stress the value of dialogue. Think tanks in Sweden can also offer more nuanced positions. For example, a researcher at the Swedish Defence Research Institute points to uncertainty about US policy as a greater source of possible instability than any move from North Korea (*Dagens Nyheter*, 17 December 2016).

These differences across countries correlate with overall portrayals of North Korea in the three newspapers. A coding of the articles according to whether they reference terms that demonize the country ("dictator," "pariah," etc.) or suggest that it is strange and special ("mysterious," "closed") reveals that a majority of articles contain at least an insinuation of the demonizing frame. Some 80 percent of the Norwegian articles contain such references, 61 percent of the Danish do, and 52 percent of the Swedish. Again, given the sources in Sweden, this variation is in line with our expectations. In all three papers, the demonizing articles were characterized by either sole or considerable reliance on major Anglophone media organizations or news agencies, East Asian counterparts, or specific officials of state or public institutions.

Although North Korea could be framed in nuanced ways, in many instances the newspapers followed the framings offered by the dominant global paradigm on the country. Just as in international media accounts, the Nordic papers could present North Korea in a sensational and emotional way. In *Jyllands-Posten*, for example, several headlines referred to North Korea as “closed” and “isolated.” Another theme was to stress that Kim Jong Un is a “dictator.” One headline demonized him and diminished him at the same time, declaring that “the North Korean despot Kim Jong-un is not taken very seriously” (26 February 2015). Even articles that otherwise treated the country with some empathy asserted they were describing “the world’s most closed society” (11 June 2015; 8 September 2016). These examples echo points made in other analyses of media coverage of North Korea.

In other media, too, a link can be drawn between Nordic experience with North Korea and an aversion to demonizing the country. Two popular books (Cornell 2002; Lamm 2012) published in Sweden on the establishment of the embassy in Pyeongyang report humorous and bizarre episodes but without a rush to judgment. Cornell’s book, in particular, is written in a matter-of-fact style far removed from the demonizing paradigm. Such books form another connection between the diplomatic relationship and public representations of North Korea.

## **Limits due to the Topics in North Korea-related News**

The topics covered also influence the way North Korea is presented in the news. Most Nordic reporting on North Korea relates to security matters or the humanitarian situation. Both of these subjects lend themselves to a treatment of the country as special and exceptional. Articles on security tend toward description of the regime and the personality of the top leader. It is easy to bring in caricatures. While alternative perspectives on North Korea’s weapons development can be found, the subject is remote from most people and does not invoke much empathy. Humanitarian challenges in North Korea can also invite a demonizing portrayal. Human rights can be a frame for condemning North Korea and not seeking to understand it. In the Nordic newspapers, local representatives of Amnesty International tend to offer this sort of voice. They condemn North Korea and warn that it is too dangerous to engage. On the

other hand, other, quieter organizations take a different approach. They deal with human rights as a problem to be confronted and the goal is not to talk about North Korea in moral terms. These include Denmark's Mission East and think tanks in Stockholm. These groups are involved in difficult tasks of trying to work with North Koreans to improve the situation in the country. They treat the people with empathy, counter to the demonizing perspective.

A few exceptional articles deal with interesting topics that are not presented as public affairs—such as a magician's or a football coach's adventures in North Korea. Others address North Korean defectors' lives, for example. One article deals with geological issues. Such pieces can help to treat North Korea as a real country in which people go about their ordinary business. Yet there are few articles on daily life in North Korea. A reason may be the lack of social ties with the country. The Nordic region has few economic or social links with North Korea that involve large numbers of people. There is therefore simply less to report on. Business in the country is unlikely to appear in the news since few Nordic firms are active there, although business interest had initially stimulated Sweden's establishment of an embassy in Pyeongyang (Cornell 2002, 9). Tourists are rarely exchanged. Even though the Nordic countries have institutions that are in dialogue with the DPRK, these involve a small number of specialists rather than society at large. North Korea is, in short, far removed from the lives of most people, so there are few natural channels for building empathy. This feature means that international portrayals of North Korea—seen in television and films, and in international news—can more easily influence representations in the Nordic region.

This situation can be contrasted with Southeast Asia. While that region was peripheral to the United Nations efforts to stabilize relations after the Korean War, it has links with both sides of the Korean peninsula. One-fifth of the embassies in Pyeongyang belong to Southeast Asian countries. There are trade and tourism links between countries. People in Southeast Asia can more easily come into contact with North Korea, through business, tourism, study, and even visiting restaurants. Such exchanges serve to normalize North Korea and counteract any demonizing representations. Scandinavia's ties are not as dense. As a result, Nordic newspapers cannot easily report on topics to which readers can readily relate. North Korea thus appears more commonly presented as a "problem" rather than just another place. The Nordic region's alternative representations of North Korea stem instead from quiet elite interactions and a

practical humanitarianism.

## Conclusion

Ties between the Nordic region and North Korea inform the representations of the DPRK that are built in the Nordic countries. The experience and expertise that the Nordic region develops go into news reporting on North Korea and brings out alternatives to the demonizing frame. Two key factors facilitate this outcome. First, Nordic newspaper reporting on North Korea does not use anonymous government sources. They therefore avoid one of the core practices, especially in the US, South Korean, and Japanese media, of giving unreliable sources. Since this practice contributes to blurring fact and opinion, one of the sources of treating North Korea emotionally is diminished. Second, reports seek a variety of views from sources whose qualifications are clearly laid out rather than being vague “North Korea experts.” Nordic sources represent a variety of perspectives and are, in many cases, grounded in direct experience. They can speak in ways that move North Korea away from seeming a fictional place.

Other factors mitigate the eschewal of the demonizing frame. Foreign media material is an important aspect of reporting in the region. Papers printed translations of syndicated articles from major English-language news agencies. Original articles draw heavily upon international media reports as well. These practices allow the demonizing paradigm to come into Nordic reporting. In addition, North Korea is far removed from most people’s lives because of the country’s invisibility at home. Most ties are elite or involve very small numbers of people in Scandinavia. Products are not imported, tourists do not go there, and investment is limited. There is little for the news to report, except for security issues and human rights. The weakness of mass social ties creates fertile ground for perpetuation of binaries applied to North Korea, which people are already exposed to through entertainment and other media. Some Nordic actors, more those in Norway or Denmark than in Sweden, also assimilate and propagate the demonizing frame.

Nordic views do not exist in a vacuum; they are tied closely to global English-language discourses perpetuated through outside media and existing in relation to global power structures. However, the fact of variation in the viewpoints reporters seek out shows that newspapers do not create and

perpetuate the demonizing frame as automatically as their counterparts in the Anglophone world. They seek knowledgeable sources who understand that the world is complex—and that North Korea is a real, complicated place. The knowledge generated through experience with engaging North Korea does get transmitted, through foreign ministries and think tanks, to news reporting on the DPRK.

The lesson from the Nordic newspapers is that alternative images of North Korea can be developed, despite the global prevalence of the demonizing frame. Journalists around the world—perhaps especially in the United States and in South Korea—should take heed. If media reports draw on a range of sources, and avoid anonymous ones, they can build more nuanced portrayals of North Korea. Such reports can help policymakers and the public think clearly when considering North Korea policy. Refusing to demonize North Korea does not mean condoning anything about the regime in Pyongyang. Nordic actors can be relentless in their pursuit of humanitarian improvement, but they do not leap to labelling the regime and disengaging. If the demonizing paradigm, which justifies isolation of Pyongyang, seems unavoidable, then Nordic reporting establishes that North Korea need not be seen in Manichean terms. There are ways to speak critically about a place without casting it aside as evil. If we imagine North Korea differently, then we may be able to treat it differently, too. For those looking for a peaceful resolution to tensions on the Korean peninsula, this point should be reason for hope.

## References

- Andersson, Magnus, and Jinsun Bae. 2015. "Sweden's Engagement with the Democratic People's Republic of Korea." *North Korean Review* 11 (1): 42–62.
- Choi, Shine. 2015. *Re-imagining North Korea in International Politics: Problems and Alternatives*. London: Routledge.
- Cornell, Erik. 2002. *North Korea under Communism: Report of an Envoy to Paradise*. Translated by Rodney Bradbury. London: Routledge.
- Dai, Jia, and Kideuk Hyun. 2010. "Global Risk, Domestic Framing: Coverage of the North Korean Nuclear Test by US, Chinese, and South Korean News Agencies." *Asian Journal of Communication* 20 (3): 299–317.

- Dalton, Bronwen, Kyungja Jung, Jacqueline Willis, and Markus Bell. 2016. "Framing and Dominant Metaphors in the Coverage of North Korea in the Australian Media." *The Pacific Review* 29 (4): 523-47.
- Expressen, ed. 2018. "Nordkorea och Sverige i Tyst Säkerhetsmöte" [North Korea and Sweden in Quiet Security Meeting]. *Expressen*, February 12. Accessed March 7, 2018. <https://www.expressen.se/nyheter/nordkorea-och-sverige-i-tyst-sakerhetsmote/>.
- Gusterson, Hugh. 2008. "Paranoid, Potbellied Stalinist Gets Nuclear Weapons." *Nonproliferation Review* 15 (1): 21-42.
- Hoare, James E. 2016. "Potboiler Press: British Media and North Korea." 38 *North*, October 5. Accessed January 16, 2018. <http://www.38north.org/2016/10/jhoare100516/>.
- Jeong, Arem, and Sung Hae Kim. 2017. "Gong-gong ui jeok Bukhan eun mandeurojinda: juyo jeongbowon ('cue-givers') bunseok eul tonghaeseo bon Bukhan nyuseu ui silche wa munjejeom" [The "Public Enemy" as Constructed Reality: Understanding the Quality of News about North Korea]. *Munhwa wa jeongchi* [Culture and Politics] 4 (4): 111-43.
- Kim, Min-kyong, and Sung Hae Kim. 2017. "Siljaehaneun jeok gwa mandeurojin angma: gungnae eollon ui jaehyeon jeongchi wa hanbando wigi jaesaengan" [Public Enemy in Reality and Devil in the Imagination: Korean News Media's Intervention into Perpetuating Security Crisis Through Image Politics]. *Eollon gwahak yeongu* [Media Science Studies] 17 (2): 5-50.
- Lamm, Lovisa. 2012. *Ambassaden i Paradiset: Sveriges Unika Relation till Nordkorea* [Embassy in Paradise: Sweden's Unique Relations with North Korea]. Stockholm: Norstedt.
- Saxer, Carl J. 2017. "The Korea Question and the Nordic Response: From War Participation to Diplomatic Recognition." *Korea Journal* 57 (1): 128-52.
- Seo, Hyunjin. 2009. "International Media Coverage of North Korea: Study of Journalists and News Reports on the Six-party Nuclear Talks." *Asian Journal of Communication* 19 (1): 1-17.
- Steuter, Erin, and Deborah Wills. 2009. "Discourses of Dehumanization: Enemy Construction and Canadian Media Complicity in the Framing of the War on Terror." *Global Media Journal—Canadian Edition* 2 (2): 7-24.
- Wendt, Alexander. 1992. "Anarchy is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics." *International Organization* 46 (2): 391-

425.

West, Robin. 2017. "A Strange but Familiar Foe: North Korea's Media Image and Public Imagination." *Asian Perspective* 41: 593–618.

Yonhap News, ed. 2018. "Han-Sweden oegyo janggwan hoedam gyeolgwa" [Results of Korea-Sweden Foreign Ministerial Discussions]. *Yonhap News*, February 19. Accessed October 18, 2018. <http://www.yonhapnews.co.kr/bulletin/2018/02/19/0200000000AKR20180219146500014.HTML>.

Yoon, Liv, and Brian Wilson. 2016. "'Nice Korea, Naughty Korea': Media Framings of North Korea and the Inter-Korean Relationship in the London 2012 Olympic Games." *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 51(5): 505–28.

---

**Erik MOBRAND** (erikmobrand@snu.ac.kr) is Associate Professor of Korean Studies at the Graduate School of International Studies, Seoul National University. He is the author of the book *Top-Down Democracy in South Korea* (University of Washington Press, 2019).

**Kristoffer TINGBACKE** (kristoffertingbacke@gmail.com) completed a master's degree at the Centre for East and South-East Asian Studies at Lund University with a thesis on male feminists in South Korea. He holds a bachelor's degree in gender studies.



## Abstract

International media regularly portray North Korea as abnormal, run by a leadership depicted in turns as evil, incompetent, all-powerful, and farcical. Such representations provide reason for publics not to question American-led preferences, dominant until 2018, for sanctions and threats over dialogue when responding to weapons development. How does a region beyond the Asia-Pacific, home to potential mediators in inter-Korean relations, view North Korea? The Nordic countries maintain functioning relationships with Pyongyang and have explored involvement in bringing North Korea and other parties into dialogue. We examine the sources used in Nordic news reports on the country in order to identify whether these relationships push media representations away from the “demonization” paradigm so common elsewhere. We find that while demonizing viewpoints are regularly expressed, linkages do contribute to more empathetic, humanizing portrayals. The Nordic example is demonstrative for thinking about ways to build support for peaceful solutions on the Korean peninsula.

**Keywords:** North Korea, media representations, Korea-Europe ties, Nordic diplomacy, international politics

