

## North Korea from a Norwegian perspective

Jan Grevstad

THE THEME THROUGHOUT this paper is the Norwegian government's strong commitment to uphold and advance international laws and principles, our condemnation of North Korea's human rights situation and their weapons development program, and our support for peaceful, diplomatic and political solutions. The article presents two simple answers as to why Norway is concerned about the Korean peninsula: Our common security. Our common prosperity.

Norway established diplomatic ties with the DPRK at the same time as the other Nordic countries, in 1973. While Norway never had an embassy in Pyongyang, North Korea closed its embassy in Oslo in the 1990s. Since 2004, the Norwegian Ambassador to Seoul has also been accredited as Ambassador to Pyongyang. We continue to maintain a diplomatic relationship with North Korea

as we believe contact is critical to sustain peace and development in any geopolitical situation.

As of today, Norway has virtually zero trade with North Korea. Our engagement is restricted to humanitarian assistance through international organizations, and diplomatic interactions, including at the multilateral arena. The embassy attempts annual visits, mainly to follow up on our humanitarian assistance to the people of North Korea, which we have been giving since the 1990s. Our assistance is based purely on humanitarian needs and therefore we do not withhold aid as and when the political situation changes. On humanitarian assistance, Norway communicates clearly to the North Korean authorities that we expect them to respect and support humanitarian principles. We advocate for the government to do its best to make sure United Nations and other agencies have full access.

When in North Korea we also make it clear that any improvement in our bilateral relations is contingent on two issues: unambiguously positive developments on the human rights and the cessation of nuclear tests. Norway is not a party to the conflict on the peninsula, but global norms, international law, and the security situation of

East Asia matters to us. Continued testing and development runs counter to international norms and resolutions. An unstable peninsula means an unstable region. An unsafe peninsula means an unsafe world. In response, we firmly and faithfully support all multilateral sanctions on North Korea, which we have adopted into Norwegian law.

An unsafe peninsula also represents a risk to our common prosperity. Norway has robust and healthy trade relationships with not only South Korea, but also other countries in the region. This region's role in and impact on the world economy, for merchandise and financial goods and services, is massively important. Finally, however much we disagree with their actions and their attitude, we must accept that North Korea, its leadership and regime, have their own concerns. Understanding Pyongyang's own positions is a first step for any useful discussion on the North Korea issue. Norway stands with the international community in supporting all efforts for a peaceful, diplomatic and political solution to the situation on the peninsula.

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Ryugyong tower, Pyongyang, North Korea. Image reproduced under a creative commons license courtesy of Jen Morgan on Flickr.

## Perspectives on North Korea and the North Korean nuclear issue in Chinese online media

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AFTER CHINA OFFICIALLY GAINED access to the World Wide Web in 1994, its internet forums have developed into spaces where a variety of opinions on social issues are expressed, enabling scholars to examine the views of ordinary Chinese people on North Korea. In February 2013, North Korea's third nuclear weapons test sparked controversy in China, with the view of North Korea as a socialist 'brother nation' weakening and some even advancing the idea of severing ties with Pyongyang. In order to understand this critical view of North Korea in contrast with the position of the Chinese government as expressed through the official media, there is a need to investigate the function of the internet as a space for the discussion of issues of public interest and the formation of public opinion in China.

Through internet forums, we can examine the unofficial, internal, and broader and deeper considerations of the different levels of Chinese society with regard to North Korea and the North Korean nuclear issue that exist on the flip side of the official and public reactions of the Chinese government. North Korea and the North Korean nuclear weapons program are among the most hotly debated issues in Chinese internet discussion forums, and the variety of perspectives that exist in China with regard to North Korea can be found on the representative discussion sites Tianya Club (tianya.cn), MOP (mop.com), and Utopia (Wuyouzhixiang, wyzxwx.com).

Tianya Club is known as the most influential internet forum in China. Launched in 1999, Tianya developed with a focus on internet literature and discussions on social

issues, initiating the production of contents and exchange of opinions to satisfy the expectations of highly educated and middle-class users. Posts related to North Korea mainly appear in the 'International Watch' section of the site. A majority of them approach North Korea and the North Korean nuclear issue from a realist perspective, and some show an impressive depth of knowledge and expertise on China-US relations or the situation in East Asia. Going beyond an emotional or official approach to the North Korean nuclear issue, they examine it through the frames of the internal conditions of North Korea or inter-Korean conflict, with some of them conducting an assessment of the issue in light of China's strategy for East Asia. In other words, Tianya Club discussions demonstrate that Chinese online debates on North Korea are not limited to the emotional reaction of the general public but range vastly to a very high level in which we can see a degree of strategic discernment and knowledge of international affairs far exceeding what one would normally expect. In the closed media environment in China, the reason that this kind of bold discussion is possible is due to the nature of online media that guarantees the anonymity of discussion participants, allowing a freedom of expression unhindered by the control of information, political taboos, or diplomatic considerations that normally come into play in formal venues of discussion on North Korea.

MOP is the largest comprehensive Chinese-language entertainment portal, currently boasting 130 million registered users. As befitting a site that leads the latest internet trends in China, focusing primarily on entertainment, the number of users aged 18 to 32 is relatively high, which makes it a suitable choice to gauge the attitudes of young Chinese people regarding North Korea and the North Korean nuclear issue. Characteristic of the younger generations, the discussions on MOP display an amusement-oriented and non-ideological approach with an overall negative view of North Korea. Posts featuring the negative aspects of a declining and unresponsive North Korea such as its closed internet environment,

its lack of credit in international transactions, and the spread of drugs by North Korean defectors, reinforce the negative image of the country. To the average MOP user, North Korea is an object of amusement yet evokes adverse feelings due to its image as a strange and foreign nation with a closed political system and feeble economy. On the other hand, we can find a number of users who make efforts to correct biased perceptions of North Korea by introducing various aspects of the country they have experienced firsthand while traveling there. Their posts neutralize the negative image among Chinese internet users by painting a more detailed picture of the internal circumstances within North Korea than any external media source and relaying their experiences in near real-time.

In contrast to MOP, the discussions about North Korea on the Maoist and liberal site Utopia (Wuyouzhixiang) show a tendency of projecting on North Korea and idealizing the lost socialist past of China. Many of the posts on Utopia argue that North Korea has carried on the authenticity and historical legitimacy of the socialist system, unlike China, which has departed from the traditional socialist line through reformation and the opening of its markets. The socialist welfare system providing free education, free medical care, and free housing maintained in North Korea to the present is used as a basis to criticize the current status of China. In addition, the posts related to North Korea on Utopia frequently emphasize the alliance between the two countries 'cemented in blood' through the Korean War and their historical amity during the Mao era.

In this way, the discussions on North Korea and the North Korean nuclear issue found on internet forums in China more clearly show the unofficial and latent perspectives that exist in society in contrast to the official and public positions of the Chinese government and official media.

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