

**SWEDISH-MONGOLIAN FOREIGN RELATIONS:
WARM SYNERGY WITH STRONG POTENTIAL
BUT CHRONICALLY UNDERDEVELOPED**





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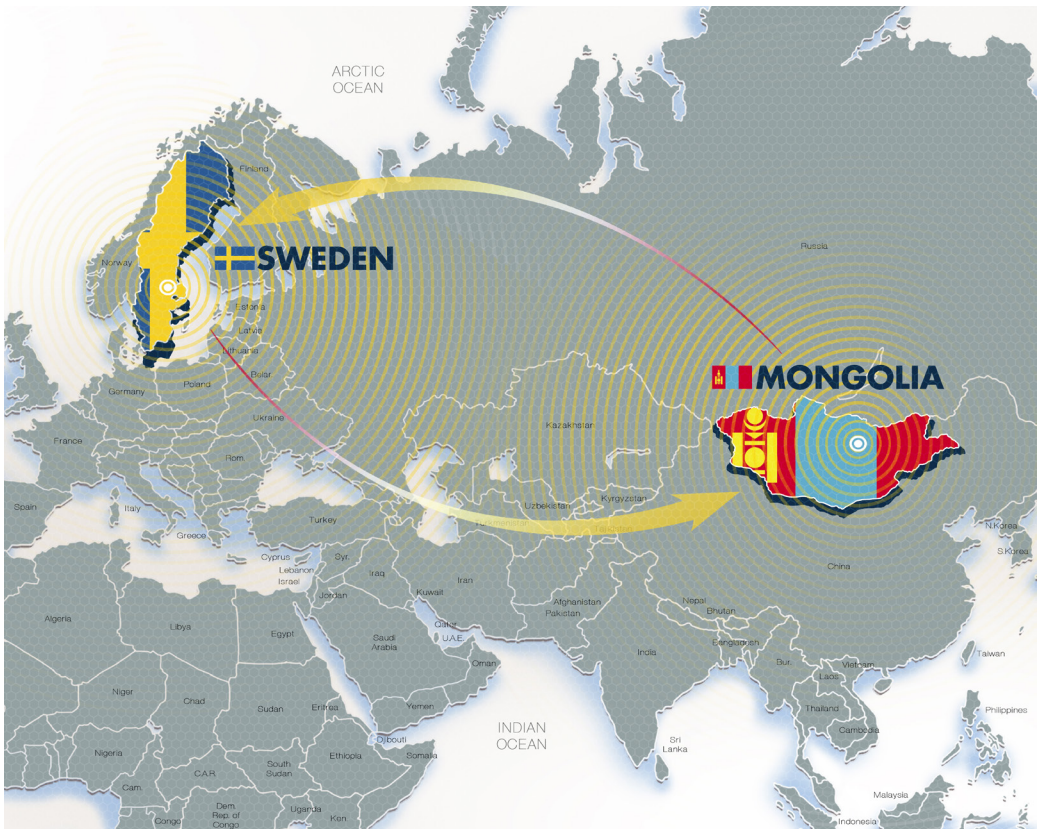
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Despite contact between the two peoples going back more than 400 years, two decades of Swedish development assistance following Mongolia's democratic transition and a large Mongolian diaspora in Sweden, the Swedish–Mongolian relationship continues to be chronically underdeveloped. While Mongolia needs to be more proactive in engaging with Sweden, the latter should comprehend that having strong relations with the Asian country is strategically important for their regional development ambitions. With the 60th anniversary of formal diplomatic relations taking place in 2024, there is a small window of opportunity for Sweden and Mongolia to deepen the people-to-people contacts and reinvigorate governmental cooperation. Individuals and non-government groups from both countries have the potential to be influential actors in enhancing this promising bilateral partnership.

Earliest days

The first recorded contacts between the Swedes and Mongolians date to the early 1700s. Following Sweden's defeat at the Battle of Poltava in 1709, Swedish artillery warrant officer Johan Gustaf Renat was captured by Russian Imperial Forces and sent to Siberia along with other prisoners of war. There, he entered the service of the Russian tsar and assisted in producing maps of Central Asia. During a 1716 expedition to search for gold deposits along the Irtysh River, Renat and other expedition members were ambushed by the Dzungar Khanate forces. Renat would spend 17 years in Dzungar captivity in what is now Western Mongolia, where he helped Tsewang Rabtan and Galdan Tseren Khaan establish a formidable artillery regiment and cannon foundry to use in their wars against China's Qing dynasty. Renat would marry Brigitta Scherzenfeldt, a fellow Swede also held in captivity in Dzungar (she happened to be the knitting instructor to

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Tsewang Rabtan Khaan's favourite daughter and ran weaving workshops). In 1734, Renat and Scherzenfeldt returned to Sweden.¹

It would be nearly 100 years before the next encounter between the Swedes and Mongols. The new contact would be through Swedish efforts to share missionary work with Mongolians. The first Swedish missionary to meet the Mongols was Father Cornelius Rahmn, who preached to the Buryat and Kalmyk Mongols in Russia between 1819 and 1823 but was forced to end his work due to the Russian government's suspicions that he was actually a foreign agent. Swedish missionary activities peaked between 1879 and 1949, when the Swedish Mongol Mission was active. The Swedish Mongol Mission operated mainly in the eastern part of Inner Mongolia. Because the Mongols were strongly influenced by Tibetan Buddhism, it was difficult for the missionaries' evangelical messages to gain a foothold, leading them to primarily provide health care and schools.²

One of the most prominent Swedish missionaries was Count Frans August Larson, who served from 1901 to 1913 but eventually became a businessman and interpreter in Mongolia. Larson advised prominent political figures, such as the Bogd Khaan and then-Chinese President Yuan Shikai, on questions regarding Sino–Mongolian relations. In 1920, he was bestowed the title of Count by the Bogd Khaan. Count Larson later published several books on Mongolia, including his magnum opus autobiography *Larson, Duke of Mongolia*, which received international notoriety and was translated into English and other languages.³

Between 1927 and 1935, Swedish explorer Sven Hedin led a Sino–Swedish expedition to research meteorological, topographic and prehistoric conditions in Mongolia, the Gobi Desert and the Xinjiang region. During the

fourth expedition, Hedin took various photographs relating to Mongolian history, culture, arts and lifestyle and collected Mongolian artifacts. Hedin's collection makes up a considerable portion of the artifacts relating to Mongolian history and culture that are housed in the Ethnographic Museum in Stockholm.⁴

Official relations

Following the 1921 Communist Revolution in Mongolia, a temporary gap in relations arose after the Swedish Mongol Mission closed its doors in 1949 and the missionaries returned to Sweden. It would not be until 1964 that Sweden and Mongolia officially established diplomatic relations. The Swedish Ambassador to China was accredited to Mongolia, and only in 2005 was a Swedish honorary consulate established in Ulaanbaatar. In 2003, Sweden and Mongolia signed a bilateral agreement on promoting and protecting investments as a first step towards deepening economic cooperation. Mongolia established an embassy in Stockholm in 2009 and operates an honorary consulate in Gothenburg.⁵

High-level visits between Mongolian and Swedish officials have been limited, with only three taking place since the establishment of diplomatic relations. The first high-level visit to Sweden by a Mongolian President took place in 2012, when Elbegdorj Tsakhia met with government and non-government stakeholders. When he was Foreign Minister, Carl Bildt (and former Swedish Prime Minister) made an official visit to Ulaanbaatar the following year. The 2015 visit to Sweden by then-Mongolian Foreign Minister Purevsuren Lundeg resulted in a wave of optimism over increased bilateral visits and future cooperation on technology transfers. But subsequent official state visits have largely entailed sporadic parliamentary delegation

visits and ambassadors merely presenting their credentials.⁶

In May 2022, First Deputy of the Swedish Parliament, Åsa Lindestam, led a parliamentary delegation to Mongolia. During the week-long meetings, the main concern that the Mongolian side raised was the need for Swedish support for President Ukhnaagiin Khurelsukh's One Billion Trees initiative. The Swedish side expressed interest in cooperation on girls' and women's issues because it is a major administrative priority of the Swedish government's feminist foreign policy. However, no projects on female empowerment were initiated.⁷

This parliamentary visit garnered much political interest for Mongolia, and a dialogue on enhancing the bilateral relationship with the Swedish Parliament was started. Upon his return from the visit, parliamentarian Markus Wiechel questioned Foreign Minister Ann Linde as to why Sweden had not established an embassy in Mongolia, given the warm bilateral relations and strategic importance of the country's geographical location. Foreign Minister Linde responded, "At present, I find the existing solution for Mongolia to be well-functioning and effective."⁸

Mongolian democracy is a strategic asset for Sweden

Mongolia's democratic progress is a strategic asset for Sweden because it improves the lives of people in poverty, strengthens the rule of law and promotes human rights, hence aligning with the overall development interests of the Swedish government in Asia. A deterioration in Mongolia's democratic successes would be a major setback to the liberal democratic order. As the Swedish Embassy in Beijing's 2010 report looking at 20 years of assistance to Mongolia emphasized: "...it is a miracle Mongolia is a de-

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mocracy being sandwiched between two authoritarian states.” Given the countless number of challenges facing the global democratic order, it is thus in Sweden’s best interest to cooperate with other like-minded countries to prevent and combat democratic backsliding in Mongolia.⁹

The overall strategic objective of Sweden’s regional development cooperation in Asia for 2022–2026 is “to create opportunities to improve the lives of people living in poverty and oppression”. To achieve this, the Swedish Foreign Ministry and the Swedish Development Agency (SIDA) seek to contribute to activities that promote human rights, democracy, the rule of law and gender equality and that support environmentally and climate-resilient sustainable management of ecosystems and biodiversity and the sustainable use of natural resources.¹⁰

Assisting Mongolia with gender equality, climate change mitigation and democratic governance aligns with Sweden’s national interests of spearheading a foreign policy in support of women’s empowerment and overall strategy in Asia. It would also greatly improve the lives of Mongolians, strengthen trust in democratic institutions and enhance the Swedish–Mongolian bilateral relationship. The 2024 commemoration of 60 years of formal diplomatic relations between Sweden and Mongolia presents Sweden with the opportunity for stakeholders from various sectors to entrench themselves in Mongolia.

Twenty years of development assistance

Despite two decades of development assistance, the Swedish–Mongolian bilateral relationship remains, as mentioned, underdeveloped. SIDA was active in Mongolia following the democratic transition by focusing on

support for the reform process and contributing to the national poverty alleviation programme and by funding numerous small-scale but complex projects on developing public administration, banking, health care, water, sanitation, democracy and human rights. But then, in 2010, its projects were phased out.

In cooperation with SIDA, the Swedish Red Cross supported and financed disaster relief training. Between 1997 and 1999, total Swedish funding for these projects amounted to 39.23 million krona. It was hoped that the network and positive reputation that SIDA had established during its time in Mongolia would help Swedish businesses establish a strong presence in the country.¹¹

The vast network that SIDA established between 1990 and 2010 has unfortunately not been thoroughly used and has not resulted in any major achievements, with only a few projects ongoing. Stockholm's fixation on other regional issues and its pivot towards engagement with other developing countries in Asia explain the failure of the Swedish network in Mongolia that took more than 30 years to materialize. On the Mongolian side, such factors as the insecure investment environment and the lack of a critical mass of consumers in Mongolia has resulted in Swedish businesses hesitating from establishing themselves there.

The failure to follow through and maintain the Swedish networks in Mongolia was made clear for all to see when then-President Battulga Khaltmaa (who was Minister of Roads, Transportation, Construction and Urban Development in 2010, when a Swedish delegation met him) did not visit Sweden during a 2020 European trip and visited Norway instead.¹²

Military relations

Swedish–Mongol military relations hit a high point in the early 1700s when Renat helped the Galdan Tseren Khaan establish an artillery regiment. Current military cooperation between Sweden and Mongolia is practically non-existent and symbolic at most. However, both countries' security interests converge, and there is room for extensive cooperation on these issues. Sweden and Mongolia actively contribute to international peacekeeping missions, and both countries are targets of Russian disinformation campaigns. Mongolian military experts are keen to learn from Sweden about establishing a homeland defence strategy.

This past June, Mongolia hosted the Female Peacekeepers International Conference to highlight the role of women in international peacekeeping missions and to which Sweden sent an official delegate. This is the largest extent of military exchange between the two countries. The Swedish presence at the 2022 Khaan Quest international peacekeeping exercise was not officially sent by the Swedish Armed Forces; rather, they were contracted by the United States' Department of Defense. Stockholm's rationale behind this is that the Swedish Armed Forces does not have enough fiscal resources to devote towards expanding bilateral military cooperation with Mongolia, given other priorities.¹³

Given Sweden's recent application to join the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and its subsequent allocation of sufficient budget resources to the alliance, the Swedish Armed Forces may now have an opportunity to join United States-led efforts in Mongolia, one of which includes sending an official delegation to the Khaan Quest or starting their own military-oriented programmes. Because Mongolia is a free and open society,

in which its citizens openly express their views on social media, including Facebook and Twitter, it leaves the population susceptible to being coerced or manipulated by disinformation. Therefore, Ulaanbaatar has expressed a strong interest in cooperating and learning from Stockholm on psychological defence and countering disinformation operations. There is potential for the new Swedish Psychological Defence Agency to train and conduct joint research with Mongolian defence planners.

Sweden and Mongolia also should seek to establish a form of military cooperation that mirrors the military cooperation between Germany and Mongolia. Since 2019, German mountain troops have been flying to Mongolia to support the establishment of a mountain infantry force.¹⁴

People-to-people exchanges

Sweden maintains a positive reputation in Mongolia. This is partially due to many Mongolians having relatives or friends who are among the Mongolian diaspora in Sweden. The Mongolian economy is indirectly supported by Sweden through remittances sent home. The major economic sectors that Mongolians in Sweden contribute to are the culinary (in particular, sushi restaurants), hospitality and construction industries. Mongolians who move to Sweden have a better chance at increasing their economic standing and thus improve their quality of life. It is a common practice that Mongolians return home with their newly found wealth, knowledge and experience to advance economic development opportunities in their respective hometowns. These Mongolians return to their homeland as advocates and ambassadors for Sweden and help reinforce a positive image of Sweden. A great example of this is demonstrated by the restaurant Stockholm Sushi in Ulaanbaatar. After a 13-year career as a sushi chef in

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Sweden, the Mongolian owner returned with his family and opened what has become one of the most popular sushi establishments in the nation's capital.

The Swedish diaspora in Mongolia was at its largest size during the days of the Swedish Mongol Mission, in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Since the democratic transition of Mongolia, there have been fewer than ten Swedish nationals working in Mongolia at any given time. One of the most remarkable Swedish expats in Mongolia is Jan Wigsten, who has conducted tourism and business since the 1980s and has established himself as one of the leading providers of luxury tourism in the country.¹⁵

In the Sámi culture, Sweden shares a direct parallel with the reindeer-herding culture of Mongolia. The people-to-people contacts in their field are strong due to Sweden sending reindeer to Mongolia to help replenish depleted herds. And Mongolia regularly sends delegations to take part in the World Reindeer Herders' Congress in Jokkmokk, Sweden.¹⁶

Need for non-government organizations

Although the Swedish–Mongolian relations are warm, there is room for improvement on promoting non-government (NGO) cooperation. Continuous cooperation between Swedish and Mongolian NGOs has historically resulted in positive outcomes for both sides. Swedish NGOs in Mongolia have had an important role in supporting the most vulnerable people. A notable example is Talita, a Swedish NGO that supports women exploited in prostitution, pornography and human trafficking. In 2013, Talita established a presence in Mongolia, becoming the first NGO in the country offering long-term support and safe houses for women. The Swedish Chris-

tian NGO Interact also has maintained a presence in Mongolia, focusing on combating human trafficking, child protective services and sustainable livelihoods.

One shortcoming is the lack of Swedish and Mongolian NGOs working to promote bilateral relations. The only Mongolian NGO to do so is the Mongolia–Sweden Development Co-operation Centre that was established in 2001 to further relations between the two countries. However, it seems to have ceased to exist due to no available information on activities. In Sweden, the Mongolian National Association was established in 2011 as a gathering place for the Mongolian diaspora; the Association organizes cultural events in Sweden that promote Mongolian national holidays.¹⁷

Environmental cooperation

Mongolia has been proactive in engaging Sweden to support cooperation on environmental issues, with a major project being the One Billion Trees initiative (a national movement that seeks to plant 1 billion trees by 2030 to combat desertification, deforestation and food insecurity as well as demonstrating Mongolia's commitment to fulfilling the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.) In May 2022, Yangug Sodbaatar, the Chief of Staff of the Office of President, made a working visit to Sweden to meet with experts at the Ekebo Research Station of the Swedish Forest Research Institute, the Swedish-based Nordic Genetic Resource Center and the Sveaskog state-owned forest company's tree nursery. The visit resulted in the signing of several memoranda of understanding between important Swedish and Mongolian forestry actors. Mongolia sees Sweden as greatly experienced in utilizing its forest resources and seeks to learn from Swedish forestry actors to help implement the One Billion Trees ini-

tiative. Bilateral cooperation on this initiative is a promising method of engagement that will help Mongolia boost its capacity for domestic tree nurseries by introducing Swedish technological solutions and developing an appropriate method of management in the forestry sector based on the Swedish model.¹⁸

Another example of impactful environmental cooperation is the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency's partnership with the United Nations Development Programme and the United Nations Environment Programme that is behind the Environmental Governance Programme in Mongolia. The programme focuses on sustainable natural resource management by implementing environmental monitoring approaches to facilitate participation and mutual responsibility among Mongolian stakeholders in the environmental governance of mining.¹⁹

Academic relations

Following his May parliamentary visit to Mongolia, Swedish parliamentarian Wiechel also questioned the Minister for International Development and Cooperation, Matilda Ernkrans, as to what extent she had worked to develop academic exchanges and cooperation between Swedish and Mongolian universities. He instead received an answer from the Education Minister, Anna Ekström, who responded that the Swedish government encourages Swedish universities to cooperate with universities from lower-middle-income countries but that any academic exchanges with Mongolian universities is something that Swedish universities and colleges should decide on independently. However, Swedish academic cooperation with Mongolia is limited. Among the few known examples, Uppsala University, together with the Royal Swedish Academy of Letters,

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History and Antiquities, launched a project in 2019 to catalogue and digitalize more than 1,400 pictures taken by Swedish missionaries in Mongolia at the beginning of the 1900s.²⁰

As of 2022, only six Swedish students have conducted minor field studies in Mongolia as part of research for their respective thesis work. In 2018, Luleå Technical University and the National University of Mongolia established a partnership under the Linnaeus-Palme Programme and received funding totalling 472,400 krona (US\$46,250) to allow for Mongolian professors to visit and lecture in Luleå.

There is paleontological cooperation between the Institute of Paleontology and Geology of the Mongolian Academy of Sciences and the Swedish Museum of Natural History that involves a four-year joint project studying Precambrian and Cambrian sedimentary fossil sites to determine the habitats of the earliest known life forms and the climate of that time. There remains, however, a large gap in research and interest by Swedish academics on Mongolian politics, military, economy and society.²¹

European Union–Mongolia relations overshadowing bilateral relations

The European Union and Mongolia established diplomatic relations in 1989. In 2006, the European Union established a technical office in Ulaanbaatar that was upgraded to a Delegation in 2017. In 2014, Sweden ratified the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement between the European Union (and its Member States) and Mongolia and expressed hopes that the new agreement would facilitate cooperation and exchange between Sweden and Mongolia, both bilaterally and in various contexts within the European Union framework.²²

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Unlike other Member States, Sweden has been largely unsuccessful in simultaneously improving its bilateral relations alongside European Union relations with Mongolia. Following the signing of the 2014 European Union–Mongolia Partnership Agreement, Sweden handed authority over to the European Commission in carrying out development assistance to Mongolia. Development assistance is now seen as a pillar of European Union–Mongolia relations because it helps support the Mongolian government and civil society, with the final objective of eradicating poverty while improving sustainable development, including the pursuit of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

There is a large number of Swedish nationals working for the European Union Delegation, and their efforts have positively and comprehensively impacted multilateral relations with Mongolia. Yet, the lack of official Swedish engagement in European Commission projects in and with Mongolia is apparent. The European Union's two areas of focus in Mongolia are improving governance of revenues for inclusive and sustainable growth and support for better employment opportunities through the creation of skilled jobs and decent work outside of the mining sector. Sweden should more actively support the European Union in these areas in Mongolia by sending more experts and/or assistance in the form of its own bilateral projects that complement the European efforts.

Enhancing the bilateral relationship

In addition to more active support, Sweden should be more proactive in engaging Mongolia. Swedish attention towards Mongolia decreased dramatically after the scaling back of projects by SIDA in 2010. There were hopes that the network that SIDA established would help Swedish busi-

nesses and NGOs to integrate themselves into Mongolia. However, as noted, Swedish government and non-government organizations' activities in Mongolia have remained minimal.

There are several low-effort actions that can be taken to improve bilateral relations that would benefit both sides. First of all, Sweden should look to upgrade its diplomatic presence by opening an embassy in Ulaanbaatar. The closure of the Chinese border due to Beijing's zero-COVID-19 policy has increased the time it takes for Mongolians to secure a visa at the Swedish Embassy in Beijing. Establishing an embassy in Ulaanbaatar would facilitate and support an increased presence of Swedish activities and business in Mongolia and help to monitor activities. It would also allow Sweden's Beijing Embassy to focus on China's domestic priorities, which would not directly impact Sweden and Mongolia relations.

Sweden and Mongolia should also seek to implement a new visa-free travel agreement. Currently, citizens of both countries are required to apply and pay for visas to enter the respective country. A major reason why a visa-free regime has not been implemented yet is because of consular issues relating to incidents in which Mongolians previously entered Sweden illegally or overstayed their visa. In 2021, the Swedish police had 24 open deportation cases against Mongolians who had illegally resided in the country. According to Statistics Sweden data, 5,311 Mongolian nationals were permanent residents as of 2021. Yet, after their Swedish-born children and Mongolians illegally residing in Sweden are accounted for, there are an estimated 8,000–10,000 ethnic Mongolians living in Sweden, making it one of the largest European destinations for the Mongolian diaspora. This large concentration of Mongolians was the leading factor behind the decision to open the Mongolian Embassy in Stockholm in 2009.²³

Similar to Sweden, Mongolia is also making efforts to establish a “feminist foreign policy strategy”. The Mongolians see Sweden’s feminist foreign policy strategy as the most comprehensive and thus the government has sought Swedish support in forming a Mongolian action plan and to strengthen the country’s democracy. As a major champion of female empowerment issues, Sweden should aim to give guidance and to share knowledge with the Mongolian Foreign Ministry in this endeavour.²⁴

Conclusion

The Mongolia–Sweden bilateral relationship is promising across multiple domains, whether that be women’s empowerment, combating climate change or people-to-people exchanges. Yet, the lack of a Swedish Embassy in Ulaanbaatar, non-existent military cooperation, negligible academic exchange and halted development assistance despite aligned interests continue to be major obstacles that block expanding the bilateral partnership and result in the relationship continuing to be chronically underdeveloped.

Mongolia needs to be more proactive in voicing its interest in cooperation and engagement with Sweden, while the latter should comprehend that having strong relations with the Asian country is strategically important for Swedish regional development ambitions. Finally, as the past has shown, individuals and non-government groups from both countries can be important actors in supporting governmental aims and enhancing this promising bilateral partnership.

Sweden and Mongolia have the opportunity to re-engage each other on development assistance and expand cooperation by initiating bilateral se-

curity projects. Both countries share a similar stance on nuclear non-proliferation. Sweden can work with Mongolia to promote non-proliferation and nuclear weapon-free zones at the United Nations. Sweden could collaborate with Mongolia and other Asian partners of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe—both countries being members—to promote human rights and the rule of law and law enforcement. And they could collaborate on feminist foreign policy in a two-pronged approach, with one at the United Nations and the European Union and the other through NATO, with a focus on strengthening women uniformed personnel in the military, police, para-military and peacekeeping.

Lastly, Sweden and Mongolia both maintain good relations with the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, and there is room for bilateral cooperation to engage with the northern Korea, in particular on disaster risk reduction and management, humanitarian aid projects, academic exchanges and strategic dialogue.

About the author

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