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**Research on
Nordic - North Korean Trade**

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In November 1973, all Nordic countries established diplomatic relations with the DPRK, following a joint press conference by the foreign ministers of the nations. The Swedish government judged that recognising both Korean states would significantly help to ease tensions in the region, marking the beginning of a Nordic consensus on the matter. The establishment of diplomatic relations between North Korea and the Nordic countries marked a significant moment, symbolising a rare opening for Pyongyang and ending its isolation from Western Europe. This engagement by countries such as Norway, Sweden, Denmark, and Finland demonstrated the Nordic countries' willingness to pursue dialogue even with ideologically distant regimes. However, the early years of this relationship were marred by serious breaches of trust.

In 1976, Norwegian authorities uncovered a major smuggling operation involving North Korean diplomats, who were caught trafficking 4,000 bottles of liquor, large quantities of cigarettes, and distributing substantial amounts of illegal drugs in violation of Scandinavia's strict alcohol taxation system and drug control laws. Similar illegal operations were soon exposed in Denmark, Sweden, and Finland, revealing a widespread pattern of illicit activity. These incidents sparked a media

firestorm across the region, which cast a long shadow over North Korea's reputation, leading to a lasting wariness in Nordic-DPRK relations and seriously undermining any prospects for legitimate trade or cooperation.

In October 1976, Denmark expelled North Korean diplomats and shut down North Korea's diplomatic mission after uncovering their involvement in illegal activities. As a result, Denmark declared the North Korean mission *persona non grata*, meaning the staff were no longer welcome in the country. Shortly after, Norway and Finland took similar steps in response to related incidents. Later, in 1998, North Korea officially closed its embassy in Denmark, citing budget cuts as the reason for the withdrawal.

Norway

As a member of the United Nations, with Norwegian politician Trygve Lie serving as the first secretary-general from 1946 to 1952, and a close ally of the United States through its participation in NATO, Norway joined the Korean War in 1951. This was achieved through the establishment of the Norwegian Mobile Army Surgical Hospital (NORMASH), which operated until 1954, thereby fostering strong ties with anti-Communist South Korea.

As of June 2025, there is little evidence of Norwegian companies engaging in direct or indirect trade with North Korea, either through third countries or otherwise. Norway has upheld a cautious stance towards North Korea. In 2017, Norway imposed comprehensive sanctions against North Korea, prohibiting investments in sectors such as arms-related industries, metallurgy, metalworking, and aerospace (as per [Council Regulation \(EU\) 2017/1509](#) of 30 August 2017). The sanctions

prohibited the sale of computer-related services and services linked to the mining, chemical, and refining industries to entities in North Korea. They were announced a few hours after North Korea tested a new air defence missile, with the Norwegian Foreign Ministry framing it as a “threat to peace and stability regionally and globally.”

The Norwegian government has consistently enforced sanctions and has shown a willingness to investigate any potential violations. For example, when [allegations arose regarding oil tankers previously owned by South Korean companies being transferred to North Korea](#), Norway, as the chair of the UN Security Council Sanctions Committee on North Korea, stated that such allegations would be investigated and appropriate actions would be taken.

However, in 2015, it was reported that the Norwegian company *AquaGen*, part of the EW Group and a research-oriented breeding company, had [sold salmon roe to the North Korean government](#) for use in aquaculture. The company had reportedly been exporting salmon roe as early as 2008. Furthermore, AquaGen confirmed that they consulted the Norwegian Foreign Ministry, which has consistently ruled that these shipments do not violate sanctions, as they are not classified as luxury goods or dual-use items under UN or Norwegian sanctions on North Korea. There are reports of Norwegian exports of computer equipment, mobile phones, and smartwatches; however, the sources of these reports remain unclear.

Norwegian maritime services company Armtex subcontracted Korea Rungrado General Trading, a North Korean state-controlled firm, to supply North Korean labourers for work on Norwegian ships and shipyards from 2011 to 2017. According to documents obtained by [Teknisk Ukeblad](#), over 70% of the labour force on some vessels reportedly consisted of North Korean workers. This arrangement raised

serious concerns about forced labour, poor working conditions, ethical standards, and potential breaches of sanctions. The controversy prompted Norwegian company Ulstein, which claimed it was unaware that North Korean labour was being used on its projects, to push for the removal of North Korean workers once the issue was uncovered.

Sweden

In the 1970s, Sweden was the first Western country to establish diplomatic relations with North Korea. During this period, several Swedish companies, including Volvo, ASEA, Kockums, Atlas Copco, and Alfa Laval, exported goods to North Korea. As of June 2025, there is little evidence of Swedish companies engaging in direct or indirect trade with North Korea, whether through third countries or otherwise. Sweden strictly complies with European Union sanctions, which prohibit such activities. The Swedish government enforces these sanctions stringently, including restrictions on financial transactions and inspections of cargo related to North Korea.

In 1974, [Sweden exported 1,000 Volvo 144 sedans](#), along with mining equipment and other industrial machinery, to North Korea as part of a government-backed trade initiative. This deal coincided with the opening of Sweden's embassy in Pyongyang and reflected a broader optimism about North Korea's post-war industrial potential. At the time, North Korea had rebuilt much of its economy and, despite its reliance on foreign aid, was seen as a functioning industrial state worth investing in. Swedish exporters believed there was significant profit to be made in the emerging North Korean market, ultimately shipping over \$70 million worth of goods. Encouraged by both economic interests and left-leaning political support, Sweden's Ministry for Foreign Affairs formalised

diplomatic ties to facilitate the growing trade relationship. However, the venture soured when North Korea failed to repay its debts. According to the Swedish Export Credit Agency, the unpaid debt has ballooned to approximately \$322 million due to interest.

Noko Jeans, founded in 2007, was a bold attempt at [denim diplomacy, importing approximately 1,100 pairs of jeans manufactured in North Korea](#). The company intentionally retained the “Made in North Korea” label to draw attention and provoke dialogue around engagement with North Korea. However, the venture quickly encountered significant hurdles. Logistical challenges, mounting political controversy – including a [major Stockholm department store withdrawing the brand](#) (saying it “did not wish to become involved in politics”) – and the eventual cancellation of agreements by North Korean manufacturing partners led to the company’s closure in 2011. While the initiative sparked public debate about trade, ethics, and soft diplomacy, it ultimately failed both commercially and politically.

As of June 2025, trade between Sweden and North Korea remains minimal, highly regulated and compliant with EU and UN sanctions. Swedish exports to North Korea in recent years have hovered around modest figures, consisting primarily of non-sensitive civilian goods such as plastics and small quantities of paper products or medical apparatus. Imports from North Korea are minimal, consisting mainly of benign items such as soaps, waxes, and dairy products. Sweden continues to uphold its obligations under [Council Regulation \(EU\) 2017/1509](#) and broader international frameworks, ensuring that any permitted exchange remains within the bounds of humanitarian or low-risk economic activity. While historical ties and past investments linger in the background, current trade reflects cautious engagement rather than a revival of substantive bilateral commerce.

Swedish companies tend to avoid involvement in North Korea-related business due to reputational risks, compliance burdens, and the political sensitivity of the region. Sweden's role in North Korea also supports transparency efforts, as its embassy and diplomatic staff monitor activities and report on conditions, which influences the international community's approach to sanctions enforcement.

Denmark

As of June 2025, there is little evidence of Danish companies engaging in direct or indirect trade with North Korea, either through third countries or otherwise. Trade remains limited and civilian, compliant with the EU [Council Regulation 2017/1509](#) and UN sanctions. Danish exports to North Korea primarily consisted of dairy products, eggs, honey, and other edible goods. In earlier years, modest exports included paper articles and wood products, among others. Denmark imported a small number of products from North Korea, primarily involving machinery, medical apparatus, beverages, and leather articles. These figures indicate that any ongoing trade involves benign, non-sensitive goods, not prohibited military or dual-use items. It reflects tightly regulated, sanctions-compliant exchanges rather than any form of renewed commercial relations with North Korea.

Denmark is one of the few Western countries maintaining a sustained humanitarian presence in North Korea, although there is no evidence of Danish private-sector trade with the country. The Danish NGO MissionEast, founded in 1991, holds a rare position as the only Danish NGO granted direct access to North Korea (with an office in Pyongyang). In 2019, [Mission East sent 636 tonnes of corn and beans](#) (worth 280 million won) to the northern region of Pyongan Province,

intended to feed around 33,000 children. The organisation has also provided nutritional support to nearly 50,00 children, rebuilt over 500 homes following severe flooding, and offered support for children's homes and orphanages. Mission East's Managing Director, Kim Hartzner, described the North Korean regime as *cooperative*, noting that despite the country's strict controls, local authorities have generally been willing to collaborate with humanitarian initiatives and facilitate access to vulnerable communities.

The Danish government's development agency, DANIDA (Danish International Development Agency), currently operates two ongoing livestock projects in North Korea (aimed at improving food security and sustainable agriculture practices). These initiatives, managed through multilateral partnerships with the UN Office for Project Services and the International Fund for Agricultural Development, aim to improve food security and agricultural capacity. These measures underscore that Denmark's engagement with North Korea remains strictly humanitarian and developmental, channelled through non-commercial aid frameworks and without involvement from Danish commercial enterprises.

Finland

North Korea sought bilateral relations with Finland as early as the late 1950s, but official ties did not begin until Finland recognised North Korea diplomatically in 1973. Finland was a strategic partner due to its traditional role as a mediator between Western and Eastern powers. North Korea operated an embassy in Finland from 1978 until its closure in 1998 due to budget cuts. Before closing, North Korea maintained most of its relations with the European Union through its embassy in Finland, as the country had “invested a lot” in its relations with Finland in the

1990s.

During the 1970s, Finland exported significant industrial machinery to North Korea, most notably two paper machines valued at approximately USD 30 million, through companies such as Rauma-Repola, Ahlström, Tampella, and Strömberg. At the time, Finland maintained closer bilateral ties with North Korea than with South Korea. However, this began to change after unpaid debts and diplomatic incidents. In 1976, Norwegian authorities uncovered major smuggling operations involving North Korean diplomats across the Nordics, which in Finland included trafficking drugs and alcohol, unauthorised selling of alcoholic wares, and attempts to sell illegal drugs. The case culminated in a major police operation and a car chase in Helsinki, leading to the declaration of the *chargé d'affaires* and other diplomats as *persona non grata*.

Finland and North Korea signed a bilateral trade agreement in 1969, followed by the establishment of a North Korean trade office in Helsinki in 1971 and a Finnish trade office in Pyongyang in 1974. At that time, relations were supported by Metex, an organisation representing Finnish metal industries. It was believed that Finnish sectors would benefit from establishing a presence in North Korea early, before other Western European countries. In 1972, North Korea ordered paper machines and other machinery from Finland, valued at over \$30 million. At that time, the investment was considered secure; however, it soon encountered numerous problems. The equipment was delivered, but the [payment was never made](#). A Moscow arbitration ultimately upheld Finland's claim, but North Korea's outstanding debt – still in the tens of millions of euros – remains uncollected. Today, Finland still formally expects no repayment. Although North Korea briefly indicated a willingness to settle in 2017, this has yielded no results.

Since the 1970s, a few notable Finnish companies have engaged in

trade with North Korea. For example, Finnish imports from North Korea [surged by 14,000 per cent](#) from 2010 to 2011, when trade included around 3,000 North Korean television sets assembled in the Kaesong Industrial Region. In 2013, [crane exports worth approximately □8.5 million](#) were shipped to North Korea. Subsequent years saw small-scale exports, including dental equipment, iron, steel, and optical apparatus, although annual trade values dropped to only a few thousand euros. Today, trade consists of sporadic, low-value civilian goods, likely sourced via third-country intermediaries rather than direct engagement by Finnish companies. North Korea has reportedly [attempted to import dual-use technology suitable for weapons of mass destruction](#) from Finland, with the Finnish Security Intelligence Service (Supo) warning companies to be wary of North Korean trade.

Although Finland and North Korea have not engaged in political negotiations since 2005, Finland is currently recognised in North Korea mainly due to the influence of Pentecostal mission and developmental aid organisation [Fida International, which has been supporting North Korea's healthcare and potato farming sectors](#) since 1998. Fida International is well-established and frequently participates in cultural events, such as a flower exhibition commemorating the anniversary of Kim Il Sung's birth.

International Organisation Activities about North Korea : *Investigate the current status of North Korea-related activities of an international organisation your home country is part of (WFP).*

The World Food Programme (WFP) has played a key role in addressing food security in North Korea, with significant involvement from Nordic countries – notably Norway, Sweden, Denmark, and Finland – through

both financial contributions and diplomatic support. The WFP has been active in North Korea since 1995, focusing on alleviating food insecurity and malnutrition. The organisation provides specialised nutritious food to approximately one million pregnant women, nursing mothers and children, aiming to reduce acute and chronic malnutrition. The efforts reach nearly 1 million beneficiaries. Over [40% of North Koreans \(about 10.7 million people\) are undernourished](#), with 18% of children under five stunted.

WFP operates through a [country office in Pyongyang and five regional sub-offices](#), supported by around 45 international staff, covering approximately 85% of North Korea's counties. They conduct about 300 monitoring visits each month, tracking food from delivery to the end-user distribution. However, access restrictions – such as bans on randomised household interviews or limitations on visiting state shops – present challenges. The WFP has [adjusted and expanded its programmes in North Korea](#). The organisation's recent focus has been on increasing the delivery of specialised nutritious food, improving food production resilience, and securing additional funding to meet the rising demand.

WFP works to [strengthen North Korea's agriculture and disaster resilience](#). Its initiatives include repairing embankments, dredging rivers, restoring soil, planting trees, and conducting technical and training programmes. This disaster risk reduction (DRR) strategy also creates temporary employment and improves food availability through “food for work” initiatives. When disaster strikes, such as the 2023 floods in North Hamgyong and Ryanggang – the WFP swiftly distributes emergency food aid. In one case, more than 140,000 people received fortified biscuits and soybeans to help them through a severe winter.

Norway

Norway has a longstanding history of providing humanitarian assistance to North Korea, channelling support through international organisations such as the WFP and the International Federation of the Red Cross. As of June 2025, Norway continues to support global humanitarian efforts in North Korea, primarily through its contributions to the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP). In 2019, the Norwegian government reaffirmed its commitment to providing aid, pledging [approximately \\$1.6 million annually in bilateral humanitarian aid](#), emphasising the importance of assisting vulnerable groups (e.g., women and children).

While Norway does not have a direct presence in North Korea due to the country's strict border controls and the suspension of international aid operations during the COVID-19 pandemic, it remains committed to addressing food insecurity and malnutrition in the region. In 2020, [Norway pledged approximately \\$680,000 in food assistance](#) to North Korea via the WFP.

While Norway supports humanitarian efforts in North Korea, it also advocates for the enforcement of international sanctions aimed at curbing its nuclear weapons programme. Norway [co-sponsored the UN Security Council Resolution 2270](#) in 2016, which imposed stringent sanctions on North Korea. The Norwegian government emphasised that these measures were not intended to have adverse humanitarian consequences and expressed its commitment to ensuring that humanitarian aid reaches those in need.

Sweden

Sweden is a significant donor to the WFP, contributing approximately \$9.5 million in 2025. This funding supports the WFP's global operations, including efforts to combat hunger and malnutrition in various regions. In 2024, [Sweden increased its humanitarian assistance by SEK 461 million](#), with SEK 186 million allocated to the WFP to address urgent food needs in crisis-affected areas. This decision reflects Sweden's proactive approach to supporting international humanitarian initiatives.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Swedish diplomats were temporarily withdrawn in 2020, and Swedish staff did not return until 2024. This made Sweden the first Western country to resume regular diplomatic operations in North Korea since the pandemic. In response to the pandemic, Sweden pledged \$1.04 million in 2020 to North Korea.

Denmark

Denmark has played a consistent humanitarian role in North Korea through the World Food Programme (WFP), particularly during times of acute crisis. In 1995, [Denmark was one of only two countries—alongside Finland—that contributed to the first-ever WFP food shipment to the DPRK](#) following catastrophic floods that year. Denmark provided approximately US\$192,439, which enabled the initial delivery of 2,000 metric tonnes of rice to assist over half a million people affected in provinces such as Hwanghae and Kangwon. This early support was critical in establishing the WFP's permanent operational presence in North Korea.

Since then, Denmark has continued to contribute to multilateral humanitarian assistance in North Korea through the WFP and other UN channels. Although more limited in scope in recent years, Danish aid continues to be part of the broader Nordic humanitarian engagement with North Korea. Danish support through Mission East and DANIDA complements WFP action, ensuring food and agricultural assistance reach vulnerable groups.

Finland

Finland has played a consistent supporting role in the WFP's efforts in North Korea since the mid-1990s. Notably, in 1995, [Finland was one of the only two initial donors, alongside Denmark, to fund the WFP's first emergency food shipments](#) following catastrophic flooding in North Korea, contributing approximately \$192,439 to help provide 5,140 tonnes of rice to the provinces of Chagang, North Pyongan, and North Hwanghae. Over time, Finland has continued to contribute to the WFP's humanitarian programs, targeting food insecurity. These programs now focus on distributing fortified meals to pregnant women, nursing mothers, and children in nurseries, hospitals, and schools across the country. While Finland is not among the most significant global contributors, it is consistently identified as a donor in WFP country briefings for North Korea.

Conclusion

The Nordic countries – Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Denmark – have maintained varying levels of engagement with North Korea over the decades, driven by a complex mix of humanitarian concerns, diplomatic caution, and historical grievances. Denmark has emerged as the most consistent provider of aid, distributing significant humanitarian assistance through multilateral channels such as the WFP and maintaining direct NGO access. Norway occupies a middle ground: it has enforced sanctions stringently while continuing moderate humanitarian efforts and diplomatic oversight, particularly through its role within the UN Security Council’s North Korea sanctions committee. Sweden is notable for its early and sustained diplomatic presence in Pyongyang, along with its numerous (albeit largely unsuccessful) commercial ventures, ranging from large-scale exports in the 1970s to niche initiatives, such as Noko Jeans. Finland, once deeply engaged – being among the first to support WFP aid shipments in the mid-1990s – has seen its role diminish, becoming one of the more limited Nordic contributors in recent years.

This divergence in engagement is compounded by longstanding issues, such as Sweden’s and Finland’s unpaid North Korean debts, which have created economic and diplomatic strain. Moreover, North Korea’s illicit activities in the 1970s – including smuggling alcohol, drugs, and contraband through its Nordic embassies – severely damaged trust and effectively curtailed what could have developed into a more cooperative and economically integrated Nordic–North Korea relationship.