

UPF Oslo, Norway: Scandinavian Korea experts' insights on unifying Korea

Steinar Murud
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Top row: Steinar Murud, Jacques Marion and Geir Helgesen. Bottom row: Stein Tønnesson and Niklas Swanström

Oslo, Norway -- Korea experts from Norway, Sweden and Denmark gave their insights on unifying North and South Korea.

More than 90 people attended the March 1, 2021, online conference titled "How Can Scandinavia Contribute to Peace and Development on the Korean Peninsula?"

The event was organized jointly by the Norwegian, Danish and Swedish branches of UPF.

The moderator, Steinar Murud, the secretary general of UPF-Norway, explained the significance of having the webinar on March 1. This is a day that is celebrated by both North Koreans and South Koreans, even though in different ways. It represents the Korean people's common struggle for freedom, which began with the uprising on March 1, 1919, when Korea was a Japanese protectorate. The spirit of the webinar was to find more such points of common interest for the two Koreas.

The first speaker was Stein Tønnesson, a research professor at Peace Research Institute Oslo. He began his talk with a description of the recent self-imposed isolation of North Korea. The border to China is closed. And many diplomats have left. That the economy is relatively good is a mystery, he said.

In this situation, a good contribution to development could be to find new channels to North Korea. The diplomatic channel is one way. Sweden has a diplomatic bond that is a valuable channel, he said.

Mr. Tønnesson also offered his personal advice to Washington: a slight reduction in international sanctions and a follow-up to the good dialogue that we saw between President Trump, DPRK leader Kim Jong-un and South Korean President Moon Jae-in. If Scandinavia can contribute in any way to that, it will be good, he said.

The second speaker was Geir Helgesen, who was the director of the Nordic Institute of Asian Studies in Copenhagen, Denmark, until 2019.

Mr. Helgesen pointed out some characteristics of the Nordic societies that might be of interest for North Korea. He spoke of his personal experiences with North Koreans in Pyongyang and also leading delegations from North Korea both in Shanghai and in Scandinavia. In his experience, they were open, curious and willing to learn. Mr. Helgesen promotes this way of interaction as a good way to build trust, friendship, peace and development, rather than a hardline policy with strong sanctions.

The third speaker was Niklas Swanström from the Institute for Security and Development Policy in Stockholm. Mr. Swanström pinpointed that there is a lack of understanding between the DPRK and the outside world. North Korea's most important issue is security. This cannot be negotiated away for economy, Mr. Swanström mentioned.

He mentioned Scandinavia's contributing role, and particularly that of Sweden, as a mediator with a long record of diplomatic bonds to North Korea during both good and bad times.

His own experience with North Koreans is that they are very engaged and committed to learn. And he said that it is very beneficial to do joint projects with North Korea such as research, even though they might disagree on certain issues.

Jacques Marion, the regional co-chair of UPF for Europe and the Middle East, concluded the webinar with a background explanation for the webinar series on Korea. He explained that both the UPF founders, Rev. and Mrs. Sun Myung Moon, were born in North Korea and, like most Koreans, have a natural desire to see the country reunited.

In 1991 Rev. and Mrs. Moon met North Korean President Kim Il-Sung, a meeting that resulted in many joint projects. The good relations that were established at that time have lasted to this date, Mr. Marion said. And based on this, UPF is keeping up the momentum to revive the vision for Korean reunification, both in Korea and in the world.