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To Build Trust, Think Small

The best way to expose North Koreans to the outside world is through modest cooperative efforts that show quick results

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In 1993 Kim Yong Sun--then head of the international Affairs Department of the Korean Workers' Party--raised a startling idea: **North Korea** was ready to end its adversarial relationship with the United States. "It's time to throw away the sword and hold up the rice cake," Kim told us during a visit to New York. Noting that nations have neither permanent enemies nor permanent friends, Kim, who is now a senior leader in the **North** Korean regime, went on to say: "No one can be sure that one day the United States and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea will not become allies ... or if not allies, then close friends." Since that visit, **North Korea** has pursued a realpolitik strategy of cooperative engagement with the United States--a process that culminated, on Oct. 23 and 24, with Madeleine Albright's visit to Pyongyang.

North Korea--faced with a crumbling infrastructure and a devastated economy--needs the United States, which blocks Kim Jong Il's access to international aid. America may be ready to help--perhaps starting with taking **North Korea** off its terrorist list. That would enable Pyongyang to join international economic institutions. A bigger deal could be on the horizon: Pyongyang may be willing to halt the testing and sale of long-range missiles in return for Washington's assistance in finding alternative launch vehicles for **North** Korean satellites.

Large-scale cooperation projects of that type are politically and strategically important. But they are not a panacea. Big projects are slow to develop in a country with such limited economic and technical capacities. The country doesn't have Western-style banks, for example. The multinational project to build two light-water reactors in the north was the centerpiece of the 1994 Agreed Framework between the United States and **North Korea**. The **North** Koreans had hoped to be drawing power from the reactors by now, but construction has barely gotten past the groundbreaking stage. The reactors probably won't be operating before 2007.

A faster way to build trust might be for the two sides to cooperate on smaller, targeted projects, managed by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and the Peace Corps. We recently traveled to **North Korea** as part of a U.S. NGO team to build **windmills** at Unhari, a small rural village on **North Korea**'s west coast. Our experience demonstrates that in the Hermit Kingdom, even small-scale engagement efforts can be perilous. One of the first things we noticed is the sorry state of the North Korean infrastructure. To reach Unhari, we had to endure a grueling one-hour drive every day over narrow, potholed concrete roads. At the work site we often found that critical parts that we had brought in for our eight **windmills** (seven for generating electricity and

one for pumping water) had been used for more immediate needs, such as keeping tractors running. The development dictum "Teach me to fish, and I'll eat for a lifetime" may work elsewhere, but not in **North Korea**. There the philosophy is: "I'm starving now, so I'm eating the bait." Despite numerous problems, we succeeded in building and erecting the American-made **windmills**, which now provide water and power for village households. Much of the credit goes to the hard work, enthusiasm and innovative problem solving of the **North** Korean villagers and engineers with whom we worked. They displayed a practical nature common to rural people everywhere.

Logistical difficulties are just the beginning. **North Korea** has absolutely no comprehension of internationally accepted business practices. We wanted to find out if the country could supply its own **windmills** for future energy projects. In Pyongyang we found a factory capable of assembling a windmill. Inside there was a large mural featuring **North** Korean missiles and words proclaiming the "great victory of the People's Armed Forces." We asked if the locally made wind turbines were for sale, and what type of warranty would be provided. At first the factory manager replied, "One year." But then, after a moment of thought, he added that because **windmills** made and distributed in **North Korea** would be state property, the factory would have to fix them any time they broke down. In essence, the warranty was infinite. That's no way to run a business.

Nonetheless, small projects are the best way to expose **North** Koreans to the outside world. They are cheap and fast, and they deliver tangible benefits to people in desperate circumstances. Working side by side, Americans and **North** Koreans learn that the people they've been taught to regard as predatory wolves are actually human beings much like themselves. At one point, members of our team waved at a little girl walking along a road. Spotting foreigners, she froze in her tracks--a look of terror on her face. "Why are you frightened?" asked a Korean-speaking American on our team. A smile as wide as the demilitarized zone that divides the Korean Peninsula replaced the fear on her face. Ultimately, only shared interests and real friendships can bridge the chasm of 50 years of hostility between **North Korea** and the United States.

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