

North Korea opening door ever so slightly to accept windmills for power

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North Korea opening door ever so slightly to accept windmills for power

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SAN JOSE, Calif. -- Lest anyone have lingering doubts the Cold War is in the final stages of a thaw, consider this:

In May, with the blessing of the U.S. government, a team of engineers and environmental specialists from the Berkeley-based [Nautilus Institute for Security and Sustainable Development](#) will travel to North Korea, one of the last hard-line communist nations left on the planet, to install windmills that will produce electricity in villages on the coastal plain southwest of Pyongyang.

The mission, announced Wednesday, follows a unique visit last fall to Berkeley by a delegation of North Koreans eager to learn about solar and wind energy.

It was the first-ever technical training mission in the United States approved by the governments of both the United States and North Korea. The session was sponsored by Nautilus, a research group focused on the intersection of energy, environment and security issues in Asia and the Pacific.

A few days before Thanksgiving last year, the visiting delegation -- including three engineers and the secretary general of the Korean anti-nuclear Peace Committee -- arrived in Berkeley during a driving rainstorm.

After a punishing 44-hour journey from their homeland, they were whisked by their host, Nautilus director Peter Hayes, for a tempestuous sail beyond the Golden Gate Bridge. The group ate turkey at

Thanksgiving and bought Reeboks at a mall and computer books at Cody's Books. The manager of Andronico's Supermarket gave them a guided tour of his upscale store, where they were impressed by the abundance of food -- and stunned by the rows of cigarettes on the shelves.

The visitors' amazement was understandable. After a half-century of little communication with the rest of the world other than on a diplomatic level, North Korea is profoundly isolated and has few resources or creature comforts.

But that may change soon.

In 1994, the sequestered country broke out of its seclusion somewhat, thanks to former President Jimmy Carter's efforts to broker an agreement in which North Korea agreed to freeze its nuclear-weapons program in exchange for light-water reactors that would provide much-needed energy for the beleaguered country.

Although U.S. analysts believe North Korean has enough plutonium to develop a crude nuclear weapon, Hayes thinks the country was a long way from having an operable or deliverable weapon. But he concludes the North Koreans were committed to developing nuclear weapons.

"We'll never know how close and how far they went," Hayes said.

Hayes' involvement in North Korea go back even farther than Carter's breakthrough. In 1989, the Australian specialist on nuclear and security issues in Asia began receiving invitations from North Korea to share his expertise. The author of *Pacific Powderkeg, American Nuclear Dilemmas in Korea* (Free Press, 1990) had long been involved in environmental issues in the Pacific and Northeast Asia.

What he found was an isolated nation struggling to feed itself.

The nation was -- and is -- being devastated by a famine Hayes termed a disaster in the making for four decades.

North Korea is plagued by acid rain, oil pollution and severe deforestation that has led to floods, drought and widespread hunger for its population of 22 million. Having pledged to halt its nuclear program, it must now look for other sources of energy.

"The famine is an important opportunity for both sides -- North and South Korea and the United States to move ahead," said Hayes. Bringing the North Korean team to work on developing renewable energy is one such opening.

As Phase I of the project, the North Korean team toured wind and solar-power plants in California and Colorado, the National Renewable Energy Laboratory in Boulder and the Department of Energy in Washington D.C.

They also dropped in at the World Bank for a meeting that resulted in a World Bank mission to Pyongyang, the first ever in North Korea.

In the final days, at a hands-on workshop in the yard of Nautilus in Berkeley, the North Koreans put together a wind-powered system with the guidance of American wind-turbine engineers.

Phase II will be the visit to North Korea in May to install full-scale wind turbines.

Former Cold Warrior Robert Scalapino, for one, believes the mission has a chance to help bring North Korea into the free market that dominates the rest of the world.

"Nautilus does useful work concentrating on energy, which ... enables North Korea to make policy change via small energy projects," he said.

Scalapino is emeritus professor of political science at U.C. Berkeley and sometime adviser to the Nautilus Institute. Once a strident critic of hard-line Marxist societies, Scalapino has mellowed after visiting the countries he once condemned -- China, Vietnam and North Korea.

"I came away from North Korea with this feeling it wasn't a revolutionary society," said Scalapino. "It was a traditional society with one party and a leadership that had a religious aura backed by a strong military. The aloofness, the isolation, the very rudimentary lifestyle was a confirmation of my assumptions that Korea wasn't this monolith we'd built it up to be. In private conversations, people could drop the polemics and speak in realistic terms about their national concerns."

The alternative-energy project is a significant indication North Korea is acknowledging its national concerns and accepting its involvement with the rest of the world, according to Scalapino.

"Policy shift is taking place right before our eyes," he said.

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