The week-long visit of Science’s Richard Stone to North Korea (p. 1696) provides a fascinating new take on this strange land. He was shown allegedly cloned rabbits (interesting if true), just a few months after U.S. nuclear scientist Sig Hecker was handed a glass jar supposedly containing homemade plutonium (frightening if true). All this comes amid frustrating, sporadic six-party talks about North Korean nuclear and missile activities and the collapse of the Framework Agreement of 1994: the deal that supposedly froze their nuclear program in return for fuel oil and reactor construction. More ominously, it now appears that North Korea has a secret uranium enrichment program, and U.S. intelligence estimates that they may have recently reprocessed spent fuel into enough plutonium to make as many as six nuclear bombs.

North Korea has some 22 million people. About a quarter of these receive international food assistance, and refugees risk flight to an unwelcoming China. North Korea also maintains a million-man army, pursues major nuclear and missile programs, and threatens Seoul with entrenched conventional weapons. Yet this troublesome pariah nation reportedly has a scientific and technical community of 1.9 million people—poorly equipped but knowledgeable and congenial, Stone found, and eager to begin scientific exchanges with the United States and Europe. This would be a clear change in policy. During Secretary of State Madeleine Albright’s visit to Korea in late 2000, the United States reportedly proposed exchanges (not necessarily scientific), but the idea was rejected by the Koreans.

There will be different U.S. reactions to this new prospect for engagement. Those who respond to countries that disagree with us by seeking to isolate them will call it a ploy to steal U.S. technology and will reject it outright. Another group will embrace it, hoping to begin constructive discussions with at least some people from this hyper-xenophobic country. A third group will want to use it as leverage to gain concessions; if those are not forthcoming, they will drop the idea. (Although scientific cooperation can often be a diplomatic sweetener, it rarely offers much leverage for securing major concessions.)

Everyone is a prisoner of his personal history. I went through the Cold War as an inveterate engager, as the first U.S. scientific attaché in Eastern Europe in the late 1960s, where I interacted with scientists that were more on our side than that of their own governments. Later I helped create the first U.S.-USSR Joint Committee on Science and Technology Cooperation, one element of the Nixon-Brezhnev detente agreed on at their 1972 summit meeting; and I was also involved in the first, mutually cautious science exchanges with the Chinese, ending 22-plus years of no contacts at all. Repressive governments characteristically try to prevent their people from having contacts with Americans, but those contacts are to our advantage because the contagion of freedom and democracy is dangerous for totalitarian societies, not the other way around.

Such an engagement strategy is what Joseph Nye, the dean of Harvard’s Kennedy School, calls the use of “soft power.” U.S. scientists took political risks in reaching out to Soviet physicist Andrei Sakharov and his colleagues in post-McCarthy America, and they generated enough mutual trust to influence the positions of both governments. That eventually led to a series of arms control agreements and helped both countries survive the U.S.-Soviet nuclear standoff in the era of mutual assured destruction. George Kennan, America’s most prescient diplomat in the post–World War II period, created the Cold War containment strategy used against the USSR. But he argued for an engagement strategy with the Russian people and later lamented the heavy U.S. emphasis on containment in military terms and the relative neglect of available economic, political, psychological, and cultural tools.

These days, approaches employing soft power to build scientific and cultural bridges are often derided. But soft power may be even more important than before in a multipolar world in which terrorism and rogue states present different challenges to democratic institutions. Scientific and technical cooperation can be an effective instrument for wielding that power. So if the North Koreans are serious, if they want to begin modest scientific exchanges on peaceful uses of science, I would jump at the opportunity—in a cautious and constructive way. The world needs soft power, and more of it. In North Korea and elsewhere, these are the weapons that must ultimately prevail.
Talking with North Korea
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