

Diplomacy in a Lab Coat

Scientists forge game-changing relationships in hostile territory

by Christine Grillo, from *Johns Hopkins Public Health*

WHEN NOBEL LAUREATE Peter Agre traveled to North Korea in December 2009 to meet with scientists there, he discovered that he was the first American some of them had ever met. In fact, one of the North Korean dignitaries attending the meeting received this warning from his 6-year-old grandson: "You're meeting Americans? Take the rifle!"

Since the Korean War and the subsequent Cold War, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) has been isolat-

not trying to sell anything. It's not controversial.. What we're trying to do is improve the lives of the people we visit.'

The lot of North Koreans struck Agre as a hard one. He noticed one coal-burning plant, but not a lot of electricity. It's cold there, he said, and they don't heat the buildings. Also, with land so arid, agriculture suffers, and there is virtually no economy.

The lack of economy, though, has perhaps provided a boost for science in North Korea. "There are no law schools, no business schools,' says Agre. "The smartest students go into science. The country's most precious commodity... is bright young scientists.'

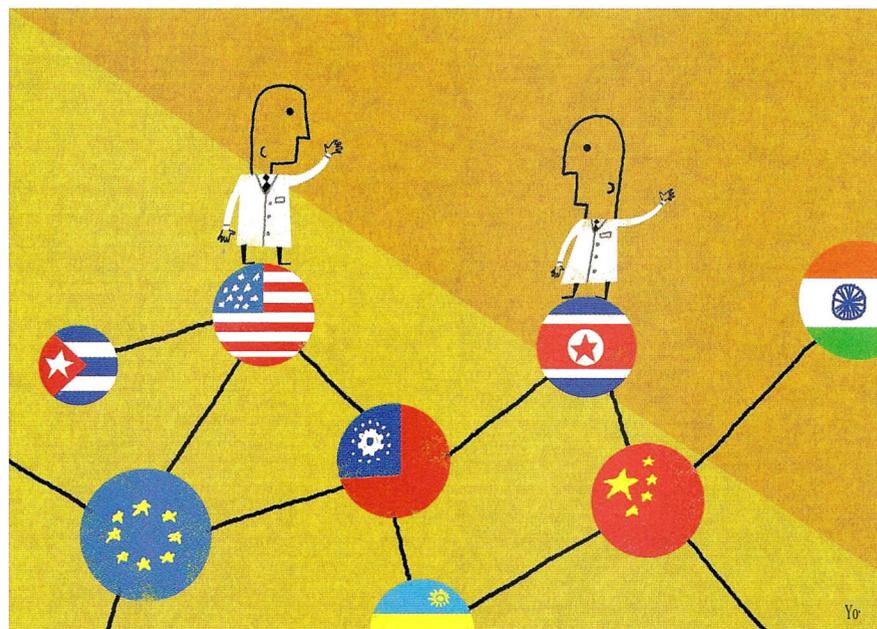
The delegation, which was closely escorted, toured three universities and five research institutes. Agre describes the facilities as modest.. "They're pretty advanced in computing systems," he says, "but they're not doing cutting-edge basic science. All their science has applications, like genetic modification of plants so they can have more productive harvests:'

"But for sheer intellectual horsepower,' he says, "we should never underestimate these people:'

Although the consortium briefed the U.S. State Department on its visit, it is a completely private entity that doesn't represent the U.S. government in any

capacity. "We're not trying to direct policy;' says Agre. "We're in exploratory mode:'

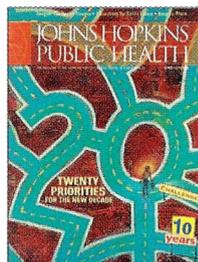
Agre and the consortium hope that more scientific exchange will be allowed, and that scientists from around the world will be able to improve the lives of North Koreans by exchanging knowledge about advances in medicine, agriculture, public health, and other fields. !!!)



ed from the rest of the world. Globally regarded as a totalitarian regime, the DPRK allows its citizens no contact beyond its borders, and the world is privy to very little of what goes on in the country. Illustrating the cloistered environment, Agre noted that some of the scientists he met spoke nearly perfect English-but they did not recognize terms such as *Google* and *hippie*.

But science is reaching out. Last December's diplomatic mission consisted of a six-person delegation, headed by Agre, that represents the US-DPRK Scientific Engagement Consortium. The goal of the visit was simple: to promote academic research exchanges in areas of mutual interest.

Agre, an MD and director of the Johns Hopkins Malaria Research Institute, is optimistic about the power and potential of these exchanges. In addition to visiting North Korea, he went on similar missions of scientific diplomacy to Cuba in November 2009 and to Burma in April, and he has plans to visit Rwanda. "Scientists have diplomatic immunity;' he says. "We're



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