Some North Koreans Get Business Internships in Singapore
While world leaders bluster, young professionals in Southeast Asia build bridges with their peers from Pyongyang.

TOM BENNER
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The nuclear threats, rocket launches, and violent rhetoric out of North Korean over the past few months have been countered by the international community with everything from diplomatic condemnations, economic sanctions, and displays of military hardware, all with the elusive goal of reducing tensions with the world's last Stalinist state.

So far, to no avail. "The United States will not stand by while North Korea seeks to develop a nuclear-armed missile that can target the United States," a frustrated U.S. Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel complained from the sidelines last weekend at an Asian-Pacific defense summit in Singapore. "No country should conduct 'business as usual' with a North Korea that threatens its neighbors."

Then there is Dennis Rodman-style basketball diplomacy, inspired by the sensationalist American media company VICE. There were some fine photo ops with flamboyant basketball star sharing a courtside table with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un, and a bump in HBO ratings, but again, no real breakthroughs yet.
Far away from the spotlight, however, a group founded by Singaporean young professionals is taking a much different approach: they are quietly making inroads and building bridges with their peers in North Korea.

The Choson Exchange, a Singapore-registered non-profit, for the past three years has regularly sent volunteers to Pyongyang and Rason, and more recently brought North Koreans to Singapore, seeking to connect young people and institutions in North Korea with workshops in economic policy and international business.

The two-way exchange (Choson is the Korean name for the north of the Korean peninsula) has been cited in the Economist magazine, the Wall Street Journal, and elsewhere in the international media for its work sponsoring internships, educational programs, workshops, and other programs, all in an effort to promote dialogue and mutual understanding.

"Building trust is key," said one volunteer, Desmond Lim, 27, of the group’s low-key and gradual approach to creating openings with people in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.

Lim, a graduate of Singapore Management University who serves as head of Singapore Operations for the group when he isn't working as a global bank analyst, said North Koreans are trusting of Singaporeans and curious to learn about Singapore and how it charted its fantastic growth.

"As Singaporeans, we play a role of middle man," Lim said. "They trust us, and they are keen to know how we grew so fast over the past 30 years, what did the Singapore government do right."

The group was founded by Geoffrey See, a Singaporean who was studying business at the University of Pennsylvania’s Wharton School in the summer of 2007 when he went to North Korea as a tourist. Knowing the country's reputation as a communist country that strongly opposes private enterprise, See was surprised when he met people his own age who were keenly interested in the world of business and economics.

The North Koreans lacked access to modern business knowledge and have historically relied on financial textbooks from the 1970s published in the Soviet Union. They also felt conscious about being shut off from the rest of the world, according to See, now 27 and the group’s managing director. He has since opened a full-time Choson Exchange office in Beijing and is building a staff along with the group's executive director, Andray Abrahamian, a 34-year-old from the U.K. (Of the group's executive team, See and Abrahamian recently became paid staff, while Lim remains an unpaid volunteer.)
See and Abrahamian are frequently quoted in the Western and Korean media and write reports on events and business prospects in North Korea. While setting themselves up as experts about a relatively unknown country, they acknowledge they can be as uninformed about the mysterious ways of North Korea's leadership as the rest of us.

The group's Facebook and Twitter pages have become forums for swapping information and observations. Economic and political developments are tracked, along with on-the-ground observations from North Korea.

"So our programs took place in the middle of B2/B52 bombers flying over the peninsula, but (were) disrupted by rice planting," group members posted on May 14, "hmmmm ... perhaps, just perhaps, priorities are right for once?"

Both North and South Korea deserve criticism, the group comments on its blog and social media sites, for the shuttered status of the eight-year-old Kaesong factory park, the largest joint Korean economic project between the two countries.

Group members travel to North Korea an estimated four to five times a year, enlisting volunteer speakers and experts to put on workshops and seminars. Getting a visa can take one to two months, despite any familiarity with immigration officials.

Last fall, in the Choson Exchange's most ambitious project to date, five young North Koreans spent four weeks in Singapore as interns at a media startup incubator. The North Koreans were between ages 25 and 39, and three of them were women. They were treated to a busy slate of company visits, visited the homes of Choson Exchange volunteers, and had the rare chance to see life outside their native North Korea. As might be expected, participants are among North Korea's young elite -- university educated, employed by government or state-owned business sectors, and demonstrating potential for personal and professional growth.

One of the group's efforts this year is a Women in Business program focusing on young and high-potential female business managers and entrepreneurs. Of the 90 participants involved in programs so far this year, 55 percent were female, the group reports.

"This is one way we can try to help them," Lim said. "North Korea is at a time where they need help, but help is hard to give."

Look past the theatrics and rhetoric, and you see North Korea showing tentative signs of a willingness to open up to market changes, the one force that analysts say can drive positive change in that country. This is one of those signs.
As the *Economist* wrote earlier this year:

Groups like Choson Exchange, based in Singapore, and the Pyongyang Project, a Canadian-American NGO, have set up workshops with North Korean civil servants to discuss previously touchy subjects such as banking and finance. At times, the North Koreans' ambitions seem unrealistic: in 2010 one group was asked to lecture on how to establish exchange-traded funds and private equity, in a country without deposit-taking banks. But contact is as important as content, says one of the groups' leaders.

The Choson Exchange's vision -- establishing dialogue and trust with an emerging generation of leaders in the DPRK -- seems smarter than a Dennis Rodman drive-by, and it may be a start at countering bellicosity, saber-rattling, and military threats.