

North Korean leader holds unannounced talks in China

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28 March 2018

North Korean leader Kim Jong-un has just completed a two-day visit to Beijing, during which he met Chinese President Xi Jinping. It was Kim's first foreign trip since becoming leader in 2011. Facing mounting threats from the Trump administration, both governments are under pressure to mend what has become an increasingly frosty relationship.

The secrecy surrounding the arrival in Beijing of an armoured train from North Korea is evidence of the sensitivity of the North Korean leader's trip. The train—with similar markings used by former leader and Kim's father, Kim Jong-il—was apparently spotted by locals crossing the border from North Korea into China.

The *Australian* reported: "The special train crossed the Yalu River that divides the countries at the Friendship Bridge at the centre of China's border city of Dandong—where hotels told guests they were unable to take rooms facing the railway line. A security fence was erected alongside the line and Dandong station was surrounded with banners that prevented passers-by looking in."

The *Financial Times* noted: "While China did not announce their guest in advance, it did not hide the fact that an important dignitary was in Beijing by providing Mr Kim with a high-profile motorcade normally reserved for only the most important visitors." The special guest was housed at Diaoyutai, the state guesthouse, where North Korean leaders have stayed before, and reportedly left by train yesterday.

Chinese officials only today confirmed that Kim did travel to Beijing and meet with Xi. According to the Xinhua news agency, Xi noted that the visit came "at a special time and was of great significance" as it "fully embodies the great importance" that the North Korean leadership placed on relations between the two countries.

North Korea and China have been formal allies since 1961, in the wake of the 1950-53 Korean War, in which the two countries fought together against the US-led military intervention.

China has been caught in a bind by the North Korean regime's determination to build nuclear missiles. On the one hand, Beijing has opposed Pyongyang's nuclear program, which provides a pretext for the US to maintain and extend its military forces in North East Asia—in preparation for war with China. It also fears that Japan and South Korea will exploit North Korea's limited nuclear arsenal to build nuclear weapons on their own.

On the other hand, China has reluctantly agreed to US demands for increasingly savage sanctions on North Korea—one of the most economically and diplomatically isolated countries in the world. Beijing is deeply concerned that Washington will exploit a political implosion in Pyongyang to install a puppet regime that is hostile to China, or to launch a war of aggression on China's doorstep.

For its part, the North Korean regime is seeking to ward off American military attacks and, at the same time, to use its nuclear arsenal as a bargaining chip to end the isolation imposed by the US following the Korean War. It is also rightly suspicious of negotiations with the US, given that Washington, not Pyongyang, effectively broke agreements reached in 1994 and 2007 to end North Korea's nuclear weapons programs.

Tensions between China and North Korea have only sharpened over the past year as the Trump administration has issued bellicose military threats against Pyongyang and pressed China to mount an economic blockade of North Korea.

The North Korean regime bitterly criticised its ally on several occasions last year for bowing to US pressure to

tighten UN sanctions. A commentary in May by the country's official news agency accused Beijing of "insincerity and betrayal" and warned of the "grave consequences entailed by its reckless act of chopping down the pillar of the DPRK [North Korea]-China relations."

Kim Jong-un's trip to China followed Trump's announcement earlier this month that he would be willing to meet the North Korean leader. The offer came after a trip by senior South Korean officials to holds talks with Kim, who indicated he would freeze nuclear and missile testing and was willing to discuss the denuclearisation of the Korean Peninsula.

North Korean officials have since travelled to Sweden, which handles US diplomatic matters with Pyongyang, to begin making arrangement for a Trump-Kim summit in May. "Second tier" talks on denuclearisation followed in Finland involving North Korean, South Korean and US officials. South Korea also is proceeding with plans for a summit in April between Kim and South Korean President Moon Jae-in.

The talks between the US and North Korea are unlikely to lead to a negotiated end to the present dangerous confrontation. Trump's recent nominations of Mike Pompeo as US Secretary of State and John Bolton as national security adviser can only lead Pyongyang and Beijing to conclude that Washington is preparing for war, not peace.

Both Bolton and Pompeo are well known for their belligerent, militarist stance toward North Korea, as well as their hostility to the 2015 nuclear agreement struck with Iran. If Trump does finally meet Kim in May, it will be to issue an ultimatum to North Korea to abandon its nuclear arsenal and to exploit any hesitation or refusal as a pretext for military strikes.

It is hardly surprising therefore that North Korea and China would want to repair their fraught relationship. The Chinese leadership agreed to impose extra sanctions on North Korea in part because Trump indicated he would be prepared to make concessions on trade, if Beijing did so. Having agreed to crippling sanctions on Pyongyang, Beijing now finds that Trump has reneged on his pledge and is ramping up trade war measures against China in particular.

The North Korean regime faces the imminent threat of a US-led war. Speaking in January when he was CIA chief, Pompeo declared that North Korea was just "a

handful of months" away from having a nuclear-armed missile capable of reaching continental America. While arms experts have strongly questioned this unsubstantiated claim, it is the red-line that Trump has declared North Korea will not be permitted to cross.



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