

## Will President Xi Jinping Visit Pyongyang?

Doug Bandow

April 24, 2019

For six years, the People's Republic of China placed North Korea's Supreme Leader Kim Jong Un in diplomatic deep freeze. Despite Kim's evident desire for an invitation to visit the PRC, none came.

Although Beijing spoke of the bilateral relationship with restraint, the Chinese public exercised none, criticizing "Fatty Kim" and suggesting that the North should be left to its fate. In turn, North Korean officials did not hide their displeasure with their supposed ally, which joined America in steadily tightening sanctions in response to the North's missile and nuclear tests.

But everything changed last year with rapprochement between the U.S. and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. President Xi Jinping took a sudden, unexpected interest in the DPRK, rushing to meet Kim twice before the latter's first summit with President Donald Trump. In March 2018 Kim traveled to Beijing; two months later the Kim and Xi met in Dalian, a Chinese city closer to North Korea.

A week after Kim's June summit with Trump, China's and the North's leaders met again, in Beijing. This January, Kim again went to China's capital to talk with Xi. At that point Xi was one visit ahead of President Moon Jae-in, who had met three times with Kim. Perhaps the most notable public aspect of the trip was Xi's reported acceptance of Kim's invitation to visit Pyongyang, rumored likely to happen this month.

The numerous meetings demonstrate both an improved relationship and a notable gain in leverage by the DPRK. The two nations, both sides oft have said, are as close as lips and teeth. But that reflects geography more than interest or temperament. Beijing desired a pliable buffer. In 1950 China's new communist government demonstrated that it was willing to fight a new war, a year after the PRC's final victory over the Nationalist forces, to keep U.S. forces away from its border.

However, Pyongyang resolutely guarded its independence against Beijing as well as other nations. Indeed, contrary to claims of some Washington policymakers that China manipulated its small neighbor against America, Pyongyang often ostentatiously flouted the PRC's wishes. Beijing criticized North Korea's system of monarchical communism as well as development of nuclear weapons. Although China often moderated new U.S. sanction proposals—fearing an implosion on its border—it refused to protect the North from increased economic pressure.

Xi and his predecessors encouraged Kim's father to follow the Chinese model of economic reform, without effect. After taking over Kim Jong Un accelerated both missile and nuclear development; two years after taking power he executed his uncle, the DPRK's chief interlocutor with the PRC and thought to be the regime's strongest advocate for economic reform. When I visited the North in 2017, officials affirmed their determination not to be dependent on any

country, leaving little doubt who they meant. Beijing's influence over Kim may have reached its nadir.

Then came President Trump's volte face. At the very least China had cause to reward the DPRK for its more responsible behavior. Kim had gone from living up to his international caricature and constantly threatening war, to emphasizing his commitment to economic reform and proposing a summit with the American president.

More worrisome, from Beijing's perspective, North Korea might cut out the PRC and make a deal with the U.S. In which case neither Washington nor Pyongyang would need China, either as mediator or protector, respectively. The North could play America against Beijing, perhaps accepting the presence of American troops in return for economic investment and diplomatic support. Then the DPRK could deal with China on the former's terms.

Further, last year Washington launched a trade war against the PRC, demanding significant economic concessions. Suddenly Beijing needed additional leverage, and its relations with Pyongyang were seen to be potentially useful in negotiations with the U.S. Certainly the Xi government had no reason to risk its ties with North Korea by aiding an America turned hostile.

Russia is offering even more competition to the PRC. Although Moscow long played a subsidiary role in the peninsula, the Kremlin appears to have strengthened relations with Pyongyang as Washington-Moscow ties frayed. Last year Russia invited Kim to visit and plans for a visit may be moving forward, perhaps accelerated by the disappointing Kim-Trump summit in Hanoi. Most important, Russia also could help relieve sanctions pressure on the DPRK, making it harder for Washington to impose a settlement. Although China has more financial power, Moscow is not without opportunities.

These factors would explain Xi's sudden willingness to meet Kim. China needed to reassert its role as a friendly power and reinforce Pyongyang's newfound moderation. Indeed, Beijing appeared to relax sanctions enforcement last year—enough to be noticed south of the Yalu River, but not so much as to cause a rupture with Washington.

Moreover, as the DPRK moved forward in negotiations with the U.S., the former had reason to cover its back. In late January, after the Kim-Xi summit, North Korea sent Ri Su Yong, Vice Chairman of the Korean Workers' Party Central Committee and head of its International Department, to Beijing, where he expressed Kim's "deep feelings to Xi and the DPRK people's profound friendship with the Chinese people." These sentiments were not often on display during Kim's first six years in power.

In sheer numbers, another Xi-Kim summit would give the PRC an important symbolic edge over its geopolitical competitors. Moreover, a visit to Pyongyang from Xi would be decisive confirmation that the two nations had normalized their relationship. The DPRK no longer would look like the impecunious supplicant. Such is the importance of North Korea's geographic position—and possession of nuclear weapons.

President Donald Trump has dramatically transformed America's relations with the North. Unintentionally, he also appears to have changed China's relations with the DPRK. Today Beijing and Pyongyang look much more like the friends they long were supposed to be.

*Doug Bandow is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute, specializing in foreign policy and civil liberties.*